



NIRVANA IN FIRE

BOOK 01

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Nirvana In Fire

(琅琊榜)

by

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Synopsis

The East River Alliance is the world's biggest clan. Its chief, Mei Changsu, arrived at the royal capital Jinling under the alias of Su Zhe. He brought with him storms of disturbances and fogs of mysteries.

A noble young master with dual identities, a Crown Prince and Prince Yu battling for the crown, the empire's greatest warrior with the Royal Guards in his grasp, a beautiful princess who commands over the border's cavalry...

Amongst these distinguished and powerful people, how did the inconspicuous Su Zhe become the heart of everything?

Could the hand behind the scenes of the whirlwind be the remnants of a previous storm?

Is he the young general who pursues enemies in snowy nights, or the shadowy tactician with a sickly body who won't see old age?

He returns to the old place and reunites with old friends. He plots and schemes. What is he trying to achieve?

This is a story of dark conspiracies and brotherly bonds. Before this story reaches its end, perhaps you can change its course...

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Book 1: Mister Mei of Jiangzuo

Chapter 1 (Modified Version)

Jinling, royal capital of the great Liang empire.

There, every object was steeped in royal brilliance. Even the city gate was exceptionally solid and majestic. Squeezed between the endless stream of people entering the city was an unexceptional blue-roofed carriage. It swayed and inched forward, finally stopping a few dozen feet before the city gate.

A handsome young man dressed in white lifted the curtains of the carriage and jumped down. He took a few steps, then raised his head to look at the word “Jinling” above the gate.

The two riders in front of the carriage sensed that something was amiss. They looked behind, then turned their horses in unison and trotted back. The two were dressed as nobility, and appeared to be of similar age. The young man in the front called out, “Su, what’s wrong?”

Mei Changsu did not answer. He remained, gazing steadily above the gate. The wind lifted his dark hair and scattered a few strands across his pale face. His figure appeared forlorn, as if weighted by the sorrows of life.

“Are you tired, Su?” The other rider had caught up, and asked Mei Changsu with concern. “We’re almost there. You’ll be able to get a proper rest today.”

“Jingrui, Xie Bi.” A smile flitted across Mei Changsu’s colourless lips. “I want to stand here for a bit longer... So many years have passed, yet Jinling has barely changed. I suppose the capital remains as magnificent as ever past this gate...”

Slightly startled, Xiao Jingrui asked, “So...you have been to Jinling before, Su?”

“Fifteen years ago, I was under the guidance of Mr. Li Cong at Jinling. I have not returned since he was demoted and left the

capital.” Mei Changsu sighed faintly and closed his eyes, as if trying to erase the grandiose. “The memories of my teacher make me lament over the past. Like smoke, like dust, they are scattered, never to return.”

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi became inadvertently solemn at the mention of the great Confucian scholar Mr. Li.

Li Cong was a famous Royal Tutor with vast knowledge. He tutored the royal sons by the Emperor’s edict, and yet did not neglect his teachings outside the palace. Both the rich and the poor attended his lectures without distinction, and his good name was unparalleled. However, he angered the Emperor one year for some unknown reason, and was demoted from the great Royal Tutor to a mere commoner. He left the capital with anger and died with anguish, leaving pain in the hearts of all scholars. Through their journey to Jinling together, Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi both thought Su to be a remarkable intellectual. Yet, neither suspected the source of his knowledge to be this great scholar.

“Mr. Li would surely not want you to harm your body with sorrow.” Xiao Jingrui comforted Mei Changsu quietly. “Your body is unwell. Our purpose in inviting you to Jinling was for you to relax and recuperate. We as friends would feel bad if you immerse yourself in grief.”

Mei Changsu was silent. Then, he slowly opened his eyes and said, “Don’t worry. Since I arrived here, it is only natural for me to pay my respects to my late teacher and his tragic circumstances. There is no reason to wallow in sorrow. I am fine. Let’s go in.”

It was nearing dusk. The day market had closed, and the night market had yet to open. After navigating the quiet streets, the three soon arrived before a majestic estate. Hanging high above was striking sign, “Manor of the Marquess of Ning”.

“Oh my! Quick, go notify everyone. The eldest young master and the second young master have returned!” It was the time of the

evening when the servants were busy lighting the lanterns around the manor. A sharp-eyed servant had seen the party and cried out, then hurried forward to greet his masters.

The three descended from their respective horses and carriage and entered the manor through the main entrance. A great mural greeted their eyes, with the words “Empire’s Protector and Pillar” by the Emperor’s brush.

“Uncle Qin, where are Father and Mother?” asked Xiao Jingrui to an elderly servant that hurried out.

“The Marquess is in his study, but the Madam is paying respects to Buddha today and will be resting at the Princess’s Manor.”

“Then what about my Mom and Dad? My brother and sister?”

“Master and Madam Zhuo have returned home. Young master Zhuo and our young mistress accompanied them.”

Mei Changsu could not help but chuckle over the conversation. “Such chaos! There’s Father and Mother, then Mom and Dad. On top of that, you don’t share a surname with either of your brothers. Someone uninformed would be so confused by this conversation.”

“They would certainly be confused if they are uninformed, but Jingrui’s background is basically a legend now. There must be very few who are still ignorant of it.”

“Xie Bi, where are your manners? Refer to me with elder brother instead of my name.” Xiao Jingrui put on a stern face, and the three laughed in unison.

But jokes aside, Xie Bi was right. The circumstances of Xiao Jingrui’s birth were extraordinarily bizarre, and involved both the ancient noble family of the Marquess of Ning and the famous martial arts group Heaven’s Spring. There must be no one alive who is still ignorant of the story.

Twenty-four years ago, the Marquess of Ning, Xie Yu was

deployed. He left the capital and his pregnant wife—the Emperor's sister, Princess Liyang—to fight against the southern Xia empire. In the same year, the master of the famous Heaven's Spring martial artist group, Zhuo Dingfeng, entrusted the care of his pregnant wife to a friend in Jinling while he went to battle with the Demonic Sect. Of course, life never goes as expected. A plague suddenly broke out within the capital and the upper class quickly evacuated to nearby temples for refuge. By coincidence, the two madams of the Xie family and Heaven's Spring ended up living in separate courtyards of the same temple.

The two women quickly became acquainted in the lonesome mountain. The friendship blossomed, and the two would often be found together. One day, while the two madams were chatting over a game of [Go](#), they were both overcome with labour pains at the same time. It was a day of high wind and thunderstorms. The servants were in a flurry of activity until midnight, when finally, the cries of infants could be heard. Two boys were born almost simultaneously.

Amidst joy and laughter, the midwives carried the two precious little masters to bathe in another room.

Right then, an accident occurred.

A tree was struck by lightning within the ancient temple. A branch broke and fell on top of the delivery room. In the blink of an eye, tiles scattered, beams shook, and windows broke. Strong gusts of wind blew into the room, snuffing out all the candles. The servants somehow managed to move their madams to safety amidst screams and chaos. The midwives, who fell on the ground in terror, quickly grabbed the two babies from the wooden tub and ran out.

Thankfully, no one was hurt. Everyone relocated to another room, settled in the two mothers, and breathed a long sigh of relief. That was when they realized that there was a huge problem.

The two baby boys were both carried out naked in complete darkness. Both were similarly wrinkled, both cried loudly, and both were of similar weight and features. Which one belonged to the Marchioness, and which one belonged to Madam Zhuo?

During the second day, the problem grew greater, as one baby boy had died.

As the Marchioness was a Princess, this case naturally found its way into the ears of the Emperor, who ordered the two families to bring the baby boy to Court. He first ordered the Royal Physicians to identify the boy by blood¹. However, the baby's blood would merge with blood from both families, without any observable difference. The Emperor took a better look at the appearances of the two pairs of parents, and knew that the situation would be hard to resolve.

Notes:

¹The test would be administered by placing a drop of blood from two different people in the same cup of water. The theory was that if the two drops of blood merged, they were kin. If they did not merge and stayed separate, then the two people were not related. In modern day, we know that this method is actually inaccurate.

Chapter 2 (Modified Version)

Xie Yu and Zhuo Dingfeng were both tall, handsome men, and their wives were both beautiful and elegant. Even though the parents did not look the same, it was hard to find clear differences in their features.

It would be difficult to identify the child based on features even after he grew older. The decision of whose family he belonged to must be made soon.

The Emperor held the baby and gazed at him for a long while. Though he could not reach a decision, he quickly grew fond of the little boy and thought of a compromise. “Since it is impossible to figure out who this boy belongs to, then it would not do to have him take on either the surname Xie or Zhuo. I will bestow upon him the royal surname and name him in accordance with the convention¹ for my royal sons. His name will be Jing...Jingrui, since he was born on Mt. Rui. He will live with the Xie family one year and the Zhuo family the next, as a son of two families. How is that?”

As the Emperor made a decision and there was no better idea, everyone was forced to agree.

Just like that, Xiao Jingrui received double identities. He was both the eldest young master of the Xie family, son to the Marquess of Ning, and the second son of the Zhuo family of Heaven’s Spring. Due to Jingrui, the once unacquainted Xie and Zhuo families became close as blood. Two years ago, the eldest son of the Zhuo family married the eldest daughter of the Xie family, bonding the two families closer than ever.

“All right brother, since our Father is in his study, let’s go pay our respects.” Xie Bi turned to look at Mei Changsu and asked, “Will Su come with us?”

Mei Changsu smiled. “Of course. I should greet the owner of the

manor I am imposing upon.”

The two brothers guided their guest inside the manor in great spirits. The servants along the way could tell from the scene that an honoured guest had arrived. Yet, with his white robes and modest appearance, they were unable to discern his background.

According to the customs of the nobility, the doors to the main hall are not opened unless it is to receive a royal edict or a person of higher status. So, the two brothers led their guests directly to the Eastern Hall. Although there was still a glimmer of light outside, the hall was already bright with candles. Under the warm yellow glow, a person paced back and forth on the smooth marble floor in deep thought, a book in his hands. Upon hearing people entering, he paused and turned, his long beard fluttering.

This was the man upon whom Emperor relied upon, the so-called “Pillar of the Empire”, Marquess of Ning, Xie Yu.

Glorified for his beauty in youth, the man stood before them over half a century old. Nonetheless, his neat features still retained some of the beauties of youth, and his figure was strong and healthy. He was donned in part-worn, casual robes. He wore no luxurious accessories besides a jade belt. In spite of that, one could not ignore the aura of grace he exuded.

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi walked forward and bowed respectfully on the floor. They spoke in unison, “Greetings, Father.”

“Rise,” said Xie Yu, raising his hand. His gaze fell upon Xiao Jingrui and his voice turned stern. “So you’ve remembered to come back. I have not seen you for more than two months. You even forgot about the Mid-Autumn Festival, the day of family gatherings. It appears that I have been too lax in your upbringing —”

His lecture just begun, Xie Yu suddenly noticed a fourth person in the hall. He stopped abruptly. “Oh, we have a guest?”

“Yes.” Xiao Jingrui bowed, “This is Mr. Su, a friend of mine. I was often under his care during my travels. I invited him to Jinling to relax and recuperate from his illness.”

Mei Changsu stepped forward and bowed as customs demanded. He said calmly, “I, commoner Su Zhe, greet the Marquess.”

“Mr. Su is too polite. You are our guest, not to mention my son’s good friend. There is no need to be so modest.” Xie Yu raised his hands and returned a slight bow. The man before him appeared frail and sickly, yet still handsome and elegant. He took another look and said, “Mr. Su appears to be an exceptional man. Please treat my manor as your own home while you honour us with your stay. There is no need to feel restrained.”

Mei Changsu gave a slight bow and smiled, then stepped back slowly.

With a guest present, Xie Yu was unable to lecture Xiao Jingrui further. He resigned with a final glare and lightened his tone. “Our guest must be weary from his long travels. Why don’t you two arrange for him to rest? Do not sleep in tomorrow, you must go to the Princess’s Manor and escort your mother home. Come to my study after I return from court, as I have tasks for you two.”

“Yes, Father.” The two brothers bowed in unison and backed out of the hall with Mei Changsu. Only after exiting the courtyard door did they relax their posture.

Word had arrived early, and the servants of the manor had the guest courtyard Snow Cottage cleaned and prepared. New decorations were arranged, and hot water and tea were placed. The whole courtyard appeared remarkably cozy, without a hint of its usual uninhabited nature.

They ate an early dinner during their journey, so Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi accompanied Mei Changsu for a late snack at the Snow Cottage. While the congee and desserts were arriving, Xiao Jingrui suddenly remembered something and asked, “Where’s Feiliu? Let’s

call him to eat with us.”

Mei Changsu laughed, “He has been here all along.”

Just as he finished speaking, Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi suddenly felt a chill down their spine. They turned to the previous empty corner, where a youth now stood quietly in light blue robes. His features were mesmerizing, yet an air of icy solitude surrounded him, forbidding people from getting close.

“This is not the first time I’ve seen Feiliu, but his skills still give me the jitters.” Xie Bi lowered his voice, “Su, with a guard like him, I feel uneasy even getting close to you. I’m afraid he’ll misunderstand and give me a beating.”

“How can that be? Our Feiliu has a great temper. He’s very well-behaved.” Mei Changsu began to raise his hand, and Feiliu floated over at the next moment. He crouched down and rested his head on Mei Changsu’s knee. “See, he acts spoiled too. It’s just that sometimes he can’t discern real and fake, so simply refrain from play fighting with me when he’s present.”

This exceptionally skilled young guard had hurt his head in the past and suffered from some mental deficiencies. Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi both knew this. However, they held Mei Changsu in great respect as a senior friend, and never planned on rough-housing with him anyway. There was no need to pay much attention to this advice.

Feiliu did not like the congee, so Xie Bi ordered the servants to bring him some noodles. The group ate and chatted. Suddenly, a voice was heard outside the courtyard. A person laughed brightly and entered the room. “You guys are so slow! I almost grew moss waiting for you!”

Xiao Jingrui was delighted. He jumped up and grabbed the person, “Yujin!”

On the contrary, Xie Bi frowned and stuck his chin out. “I say,

Yujin, aren't you a bit too quick on the news? We've just returned, and it's so late. What're you doing here?"

"I notified your steward to send me notice as soon as you've returned." Yan Yujing walked forward swiftly to greet Mei Changsu. "Su, you look great today. You must've been so bored travelling with these two without me, right?"

Notes:

[1](#)] Often, there would be a naming convention for each generation within a family. For example, the current line of the Emperor's sons are named Xiao Jing__. As such, we have Xiao Jingrui, Jingxuan, Jinghuan, etc.

Chapter 3 (Modified Version)

Yan Yujin was the eldest son of the Royal Uncle, the Empress's nephew, as well as Xiao Jingrui's best friend. The three noble gentlemen met Mei Changsu during their travels and originally planned to return to Jinling together. However, they chanced upon an elderly couple during their journey and saved them from assassination. They learned that the couple planned on entering the capital to sue the Duke of Qing, Bai Ye. At Bin Prefecture, home to the Duke, his relatives were guilty of pillaging farms, bullying citizens, stealing land, and manslaughter. As the families of the Marquess of Ning and the Duke of Qing have been long time friends, Xie Bi was afraid of being reprimanded by his father for meddling in this matter. On the other hand, the easy-going Yan Yujin answered the call of chivalry and offered to escort this old couple to the capital ahead of the party. He refused to allow Xiao Jingrui to accompany them, instead insisting that he should accompany Mei Changsu, who must travel at a slower pace due to his poor health.

“How are Uncle and Aunt Hu?” Mei Changsu naturally needed to inquire after the elderly pair upon seeing Yan Yujin.

“The complaint has already been submitted to the Royal Investigators, and everything is in order now. The Emperor ordered a special investigator to Bin Prefecture by secret edict. The case won't start before the investigations are finished, so everything is still calm. Xie Bi, you needn't be in such a hurry to be distant with me to avoid problems.” Yan Yujin spoke in a humorous tone, but his words were unyielding. “I wanted to come see Jingrui and Su despite it being so late, I didn't come to see you! If you don't like it, you can come bite me!”

“Bah!” scoffed Xie Bi, “Your skin is so thick, who can bite through it?”

“All right all right. Enough with the wisecracks, onto a serious

topic now.” Yan Yujin pulled a chair over to the table and chugged a cup of tea. “I bet you guys don’t even know how great your timing is for your return!”

“Great timing?” Xiao Jingrui blinked, confused. “What are we in time for?”

“Haha!” Yan Yujin smacked his best friend’s shoulder with vigor, “You guys are just in time for a huge event!”

Hearing this, Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi’s eyes both widened with curiosity. The two knew Yan Yujin very well. This nephew of the Empress was the biggest drama lover in the capital. Wherever a spectacle existed, one would certainly see his shadow. Since he had seen so many events, his standards were naturally high. So, whatever it was, if it could be described by him as a “huge” event, it definitely couldn’t be boring.

“Stop torturing us! Spill it, what sort of event will there be? Will the Royal Court host a martial arts tournament?” urged Xie Bi.

“Even better than that,” said Yan Yujin, waving his hand. “Do you guys still remember who we saw outside the little town where we met Su?”

“We saw...” Xie Bi thought for a moment. “Ah, those envoys sent by the Yu empire to Liang! Weren’t they throwing a fit in the restaurant saying how they lost their letter of credence? They were smashing things and searching people. Those barbarians were just itching for a lesson! Have they entered the capital? What are they here for?”

“Hehe,” grinned Yan Yujin, “They’re here to request a political marriage!”

“Oh, is that so...” Xie Bi was rather disappointed. “The Emperor will examine the envoys as usual. It will be interesting, but hardly a huge event.”

“Hey, don’t jump to conclusions.” Yan Yujin gave him a sidelong

glance. “Not only will this event involve the Emperor and the Yu envoys, it will also include a third party you’ll never think of! Take a guess!”

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi had only begun to think when Mei Changsu said, “Have the envoys from the northern Yan empire also arrived at Jinling?”

Yan Yujin was slightly taken aback, but quickly regained his excitement. “Su is correct. The party of envoys from Yan is also quite sizeable. The two groups have been competing in Jinling for quite some days. The Emperor couldn’t make a decision, or perhaps he didn’t want to make a decision. So, he declared in an edict for there to be a fair competition in three days, outside the Vermillion Bird Gate!”

“This sounds more interesting.” Xiao Jingrui raised his eyebrows. “We’ve already seen Jindiao Chaiming as part of the Yu envoys. I don’t know if Yan brought Tuoba Hao with them, but their representative couldn’t be any weaker. A competition between these two parties will surely be a sight.”

“A competition between two? There will be three parties!” Yan Yujin laughed, pleased with himself.

“Oh?” The two brothers asked simultaneously, “Who else?”

Yan Yujin was enjoying the suspense. He was just about to tease them some more, when Mei Changsu chuckled and said, “I’m guessing our host. Gentlemen are enamoured by fair ladies. Shouldn’t our own brave warriors of Liang have a chance as well?”

Facing the inquiring gazes from the two brothers, Yan Yujin was forced to confirm. “Su is correct. This is the third interested party.”

Xie Bi was surprised. “His Majesty’s edict is strange. If he does not want a political tie, can’t he simply refuse? If he wants a political marriage, why is he dragging in our own men into the

competition?”

“You don’t understand now, do you?” Yan Yujin was in good spirits again. “As I said before, they are here to request a marriage. They’re not simply negotiating for a political tie! Did you think it would be the same as the past, where if the Emperor agrees, a suitable princess would be simply chosen to enter the marriage? That the other party would not care who it is, as long as it’s a noble princess of the great Liang?”

“Are you suggesting that this time, envoys from Yu and Yan have come to ask for a specific princess in marriage?”

“That’s right.” Yan Yujin continued mysteriously, “A specific princess, a princess they’re willing to get beaten black and blue to marry... Do you want to take a guess...?”

Before he finished, Mei Changsu placed down his bowl of porridge and said, “I’m guessing it is Princess Nihuang.”

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi both jumped up in shock, gasping, “What?!”

Yan Yujin glared at Mei Changsu in resentment. He said bitterly, “Su, even though your intelligence is really something to be admired, this bad habit of correctly guessing everything is really tiresome. It makes people feel very unfulfilled!”

“Sorry, I will reflect on it. I won’t be like this anymore,” chuckled Mei Changsu. “Please continue.”

“What is there to continue? I’ve basically told all there is to the story...”

“This is all there is?” cried Xie Bi. “What type of idiotic request is this from Yu and Yan? The Emperor should’ve rejected it from the start, not start some public tournament! Has none of the court officials said anything? How can Princess Nihuang marry to foreign land?”

A chilly smile appeared at the edges of Mei Changsu’s lips, so

faint that it was barely discernable.

Indeed, how can Princess Nihuang marry to foreign land? She was not your average noble lady who grew up in some secluded inner palace. Princess Nihuang was a brilliant female general, commanding a hundred thousand cavalry units at the empire's southern border. Ten years ago, Liang's southern enemy Chu raised war. The Prince of Yunnan, Mu Shen was in charge of protecting the southern border, and died in battle. His daughter Nihuang was appointed commander in the crisis. The entire army battled Chu in cloths of mourning and annihilated thirty thousand enemies. After the war, the Emperor decreed Princess Nihuang to defend the southern border in place of her young brother. The whole southern army was under her command. The Princess also once swore to the heavens that she will not marry until her young brother can inherit the heavy duty of Yunnan. She is twenty-seven years old now, and still unmarried.

Chapter 4 (Modified Version)

Due to Princess Nihuang's important status, the noble young men were taken aback at the Emperor's decision to allow foreigners in this competition for her hand in marriage. Xiao Jingrui was the first to ask, "Didn't the Emperor ask for Princess Nihuang's opinion in this matter?"

Yan Yujin continued slowly, "Of course he did. The Princess agreed, since the heir to the Prince of Yunnan, Mu Qing, came of age last month and inherited the title. But, she did add several conditions. First, the competitor must be the person asking for her hand. Additionally, she'll leave the literary tournament to His Majesty, but the top candidates in the martial arts tournament must compete with her. She will only marry if she loses to them."

The two brothers breathed a sigh of relief after hearing this. Xie Bi said reproachfully, "Stupid Yujin, you were riling us up on purpose! This is much better. Most of the top fighters in Yu and Yan must be married, and thus won't be eligible. I doubt there will be anyone with skills better than our Princess Nihuang in the small pool of unmarried men."

"They don't necessarily need better skills than her," interjected Mei Changsu again. "If the Princess is interested in a candidate, she will naturally lose even if she is stronger."

"I think so too," said Yan Yujin smugly. "You all know that the Princess has always liked me best..."

Xie Bi spat out the tea he was drinking and coughed, "The...the Princess has always liked to yell at you best! A weirdo like you can give up hope. Princess Nihuang has been weathered from many battlefields. She can only like a man who is reliable and responsible."

"Ahh," sighed Yan Yujin. "Xie Bi, you're so cruel, bursting my dreams like that..."

“Stop messing around already.” Xiao Jingrui gave Yan Yujin a shove and said, “But Yu and Yang must have come here with sweet dreams. I mean, they don’t lose much even if they fail, but if they succeed... Think about it, not only will the two empires be tied in marriage, they will also gain a military genius and a boost to their fame.”

Mei Changsu said mildly, “The Royal Courts of Yu and Yan have been shaky lately, no? Each have a few parties battling for the position of Crown Prince. If a Prince manages to marry Princess Nihuang now, it would be the same as securing the position of Crown Prince.”

“Su really got to the root of the matter there. Even though they know we wouldn’t marry Princess Nihuang to foreign land, they must still take this opportunity to compete. If they manage to win by some stroke of luck, it will guarantee victory back home.” Yan Yujin added with admiration, “I wonder who gave them this idea for them to summon their courage and come here.”

Mei Changsu looked at Yan Yujin with great interest and asked, “How are you certain that someone gave them this idea?”

Yan Yujin shrugged, “I don’t really like to analyze things. This is just my intuition speaking. Think about it, the two empires thought of this idea at the same time, and took action at about the same time. Isn’t that too much of a coincidence?”

“Who cares about coincidences, it’s all good as long as Princess Nihuang does not marry a foreigner.” Xie Bi waved his hand, and turned towards Mei Changsu. “Su, who do you think will win in this competition?”

Mei Changsu laughed in spite of himself. “I’m not a fortune-teller. How could I know?”

“You correctly guessed everything Yujin asked just now. I thought you could see the future!” Xie Bi laughed as well.

“All right, I’ll tell you the truth,” chuckled Mei Changsu. “I didn’t actually guess.”

“Didn’t guess?” Yan Yujin immediately became excited. “Does Su actually know the arts of fortune-telling?”

“How can a mere fool such as I untangle the intricacies of fortune?” Mei Changsu took out a roll of text from his sleeves as he spoke, “I did not guess. I actually knew of this matter long before. It says it all right here...”

Yan Yujin took the text with great curiosity. The three gathered around to read it, and cried out in astonishment.

“This is a letter by the hands of the Emperor of Yu, appointing his envoys to request a political marriage!” Xie Bi’s eyes bulged. “Why is it in your hands?”

“Ah, the restaurant in that town... The Yu envoys really lost their letter of credence.” Yan Yujin tilted his head and stared at Mei Changsu. “Su, were you really bored or something? Stealing their letter like that...”

“You’re right, I was really bored.” Mei Changsu still wore his light smile. “The Yu envoys happened to rest in the same inn as me. The owner of the inn told me they kept a long sandalwood box under close guard, which definitely contained treasures. I was curious, so I asked Feiliu to bring it to me. Who knew it was just an official letter? Since it had nothing to do with someone like me, I wasn’t really interested. I was intending to place it back, but they discovered the loss so quickly and made a scene. There was no choice, so I never ended up returning it...”

The three had all been witness to Feiliu’s amazing skills, so none were surprised to hear that he was the culprit. But really, this Mei Changsu is a bit too curious. Isn’t he afraid of getting into trouble by taking the letter of credence from envoys?

“Oh right, are there any requirements or limitations for the

competition?” Xiao Jingrui returned the conversation to its original topic.

“Of course. He needs to be from a good family, of similar age, of handsome features, and unmarried...”

“Just that?”

“Just that.”

“Ah!” cried Xie Bi, “Then you can join too, brother!”

“Me?” Xiao Jingrui was startled. “I have great respect for Princess Nihuang, but I’ve never thought of...”

“Nobody’s asking you to be the final victor,” said Xie Bi, tugging on his sleeves. “The more men from Liang to compete, the better, since it will lessen the chance of a victor from Yu or Yan. Since you’re so outstanding, you will definitely eliminate many competitors. You can also filter out unqualified candidates for Princess Nihuang.”

“But...”

“But what? My combat skills are lacking, so it’ll be useless even if I sign up. However, you’re the second son of Heaven’s Spring. Uncle Zhuo taught you martial arts personally, so you qualify as a great fighter at least. Su has gone to such lengths on our way back to give you pointers for your moves. Just think of it as gaining some battle experience.” Without further ado, Xie Bi turned to Yan Yujin and said, “Yujin, please sign him up tomorrow.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about it, I’ve already signed him up.” Yan Yujin grinned impishly.

“Oy... You two...”

“Don’t be nervous,” said Mei Changsu, suppressing his laughter, “I know your level in martial arts very well. It’ll be impossible to be the final victor, but what’s the harm in competing for a few rounds?”

“Are those words supposed to comfort me?” Xiao Jingrui felt like crying. “Am I fun to bully or something...?”

Xie Bi thought of another question, “The nobility of Jinling can’t be the only ones who know of this event, right? Can talented people from the common class join as well?”

“Of course they can.” Yan Yujin gave him a glance, “News like this can’t be hidden anyway. Besides, the Emperor wants to choose a good husband for the Princess, to reward her hardships on the battlefields. Haven’t you noticed all sorts of brilliant martial artists on your way to the capital?”

The three recalled carefully, and slowly realized that it was just as Yan Yujin had said. Since there always was an endless stream of people entering the capital, they haven’t paid much attention.

“All right, enough chatting with you guys.” Yan Yujin stood up and stretched. “I need to get a good rest so that in three days, I can exhibit my amazing skills, beat down all the brilliant martial artists, and win the maiden heart of Princess Nihuang...”

Xie Bi rolled his eyes. “This guy’s dreaming while he’s still awake...”

“It really is time to leave. Su needs to rest.” Xiao Jingrui added, “Feiliu has been asleep for a long time now.”

Everyone turned. Feiliu was lying on the bed still clothed, with the curtains still up. He was sleeping soundly.

“He still feels like a block of ice even when he’s aslee—” Yan Yujin began to comment when Feiliu’s eyes suddenly opened. Startled, he pointed at Xiao Jingrui. “He said that!”

Feiliu’s eyes stared off in the distance for a bit, then closed again.

“Don’t worry, he already knows your voices,” assured Mei Changsu. “If there was a stranger’s voice, Feiliu would wake up immediately.”

“Phew,” breathed Yan Yujin, patting his chest. “Then we will take our leave. Please rest early, Su.”

Mei Changsu rose to walk the others to the door and watched as the three left. The gong sounded for 9PM, and he stopped to listen. He stared out into the silent darkness of the manor for a long while, before slowly closing the door.

Chapter 5 (Modified Version)

The city of Jinling was famed for its royal brilliance, with the Royal Palace of the Emperor of Liang at its centre. After exiting the South Victory Gate and following a slanted red brick road, one would find themselves before an exquisite manor, independent yet seemingly one with the palace.

The manor is not extraordinarily large, yet a dire mistake would be made should one deduce the owner of the manor by its size. The main gate of the manor was closed year-round. Above them hung a pure black sign with gold edges. The sign reads, “Manor of Liyang”.

Princess Liyang, the only living sister of the Emperor, the wife of the Marquess of Ning.

Everyone in the capital with some years to their names could clearly remember the grand occasion of the Princess’s marriage that stirred up the city. The couple who gazed upon the commoners atop the Phoenix Building could be accurately described as a hero and a beauty. Twenty-four years flew by, and the couple remains attentive and loving. They reared three sons and one daughter, all of whom are intelligent and respectful. This was the perfect model family in everyone’s eyes.

According to the customs of the royal family, Xie Yu should have relocated to the Princess’s manor after marriage, and be referred to as a “Prince Consort” rather than “Marquess”. The late Empress Dowager¹ did not approve of Princess missing the joys of family life without due to her high status. In accordance with the Princess’s own wishes as well, she moved into the Manor of the Marquess of Ning after their marriage and paid proper respects to her father- and mother-in-laws. The Princess was dignified and virtuous in nature. She ordered servants to refer to her as Madam within the manor, being especially strict in this regard with her own servants.

Later, Xie Yu was decorated for his military feats, elevating further within the Royal Court. As the Princess kept a constant low profile, people slowly became accustomed to seeing the relationship as “Marquess” and “Marchioness”, rather than what should have been “Princess” and “Prince Consort”.²

This Manor of Liyang was constructed when the Princess was fifteen and had been left idle since her marriage. Princess Liyang felt it a pity to leave the manor vacant, so she ordered all types of unique plants and flowers to be nurtured there. The manor was fragrant year-round, and was a top attraction within the capital. Royal Concubines and noble ladies frequently requested to sightsee during flowering seasons. The Princess would rest there for a few days to pay respect to Buddha, or to accompany the visiting Grand Empress Dowager³.

Their mother happened to be staying at her manor when Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi returned from their journey,

In the early morning, the two brothers obeyed their father’s command and went to greet the Princess at the Manor of Liyang, then escorted her royal carriage back to the Manor of the Marquess of Ning. As the old Marquess and Marchioness have passed away, there was no need to greet them. Princess Liyang instructed the party to return straight to her usual dwellings in the main building of the inner courtyard.

The party walked along the corridor, passing by the side courtyard. Sweet osmanthus trees were planted along the walls, which had some late blooms and lingering fragrance. Princess Liyang slowed down, apparently enjoying the fragrance in the breeze. Right at that moment, a whisper of guqin⁴ travelled over the walls. The music was indistinct as it came from quite some distance, but the tone was clear and spirited, whisking the listeners away to a greater realm.

“Who is playing the guqin? The musician is remarkably

talented.”

Xiao Jingrui leaned over for a closer listen. After a moment, he replied, “This is a friend of mine. His name is Su Zhe. Upon my invitation, he came to Jinling to rest and recuperate. He is currently staying at the Snow Cottage.”

“Does Mother wish to meet him?” asked Xie Bi quickly.

Princess Liyang smiled softly. “Since he is Jingrui’s friend, he is naturally under the care of you two. Why would there be a need to meet me?”

“But it’s hard to hear the music properly here. Why don’t I ask Su to come to the inner courtyard to play for Mother?” suggested Xie Bi.

Princess Liyang frowned slightly, but her voice was still gentle. “Bi, this Mr. Su is a guest here, not some entertainer to summon here and there. If it is meant to be, I will hear him play again. If fate dictates otherwise, then it cannot be forced.”

Xiao Jingrui felt similarly to Princess Liyang at his brother’s suggestion, and was rather upset. However, as their mother has already rejected the idea, he decided to stay silent. Of course, it was not Xie Bi’s intention to be rude. He was accustomed to having people oblige his mother’s wishes due to her high status, and didn’t really think about his suggestion. His face flushed from the resulting rebuke.

They arrived at the main building of the inner courtyard. Princess Liyang sat down on a long couch by the window. She was naturally clever, and her perceptive eyes saw that her sons appeared to have other matters to attend to, and did not keep them for long. After some idle chatter, she sent the two away.

Due to the circumstances of his birth, Xiao Jingrui had long since renounced his right to the Marquess title, insisting the inheritance for Xie Bi instead. As Xie Bi grew older, it became evident that he

was better than his brother in political affairs and managing relations. For the past few years, the Marquess of Ning has been delegating the majority of the family affairs to Xie Bi and having him be the representative in many important occasions. Thus, Xie Bi was constantly under a pile of work, and disappeared as soon as he left the inner courtyard. The comparatively idle Xiao Jingrui instead rushed to the Snow Cottage.

Mei Changsu had abandoned the guqin and was reading under a tree. He raised his head and smiled brightly towards the courtyard entrance when he heard hurried footsteps. Spots of sunlight slipped between leaves to dance softly upon his face, making the smile appear exceedingly radiant.

Xiao Jingrui smiled as well, and gave a slight bow in greeting. He asked, “Did Su rest well last night?”

“Were you worried that I won’t be able to sleep well?” Mei Changsu motioned for him to bring a chair over to sit. “I’m not picky with my beds. I only slept in due to staying up late, thinking about the ‘huge event’ Yujin spoke of. Feiliu said that you came here in the morning as well?”

“Mhmm.” Xiao Jingrui looked around, “Where’s Feiliu?”

“Oh, I let him go play outside since it’s his first time in Jinling,” answered Mei Changsu mildly.

Xiao Jingrui broke out in a cold sweat. Although Feiliu was mentally a child, his combat skills were those of a master. What a daring person Mei Changsu was, to allow Feiliu to go play so easily.

“Don’t worry, our Feiliu wouldn’t cause any disturbances.” Mei Changsu smiled, as if reading Xiao Jingrui’s mind. “With his skills, he can disappear in a flash even if he made a mess. People wouldn’t be able to come trouble this manor.”

“You know I’m not concerned about being troubled,” defended Xiao Jingrui with a smile, “Su is attaching false blame on me

again.”

Mei Changsu didn't respond. Instead, he knocked on the table and said, “Since you're here, why don't we battle a bit in a game of Go?”

Xiao Jingrui stood up immediately and went indoors to fetch a Go set. He set up the game on a stone table under the tree. Even though Mei Changsu was incredibly talented, he is not perfect, at least not in his skills in Go. Xiao Jingrui had perfect understandings of his capabilities from their trip together. He did require full power to force Mei Changsu to frown in deep thought and slowly contemplate his next move.

Three rounds later, Mei Changsu was in absolute defeat. Xiao Jingrui laughed while clearing the mess of stones, “Su, although you're not bad at Go, you don't have an instinct for counting. I can safely boast that you won't be able to win against me in this lifetime.”

“Don't get haughty now. Just wait until I teach Feiliu, he'll be making you cry. Feiliu's mind is not as bright and complicated as others, but his focus is astonishing. Out of all the people I know, no one can compare with him in that regard.”

Xiao Jingrui ignored his attempt to preserve dignity, and raised his head to look outside. He asked, “Where did you send Feiliu? It's already noon now, and he hasn't returned.”

Notes:

[1](#)Emperor's mother

[2](#)To clear any potential confusion: According to customs, the couple should be viewed as “the Princess and her husband”, with the Princess holding higher status. However, the couple is viewed as “the Marquess and his wife”, with the Marquess holding higher status.

3]Emperor's grandmother

4]A beautiful plucked seven-string instrument.

Chapter 6 (Modified Version)

Speak of the devil. At that moment, clear cries sounded from outside the courtyard, followed by the sound of cloth snapping in the air. A deep and powerful male voice yelled, “Who dares to make mischief in the manor of the Marquess? Freeze!”

“Oh no, this voice belongs to...to...” Xiao Jingrui jumped up, startled. He felt a squeeze on his arm, and turned to find a solemn Mei Changsu gripping his forearm and saying gravely, “Quick, take me there!”

Without further thought, Xiao Jingrui hastily wrapped his arm around Mei Changsu’s waist. He summoned his inner energy, took a few great leaps over buildings, and flew to the scene of the disturbance.

They flitted across a side corridor and rushed into the main courtyard. Two figures were rushing about in intense combat. Not only did Feiliu possess peculiar movement abilities, he was also a fierce swordsman. The point of his sword sent cutting chills into his opponents with their vicious attacks. Yet, his current opponent did not lose even a slight bit of ground, deflecting and striking with his palm technique. His intense inner energy was fiery like the scorching sun. His attacks rendered the Feiliu incapable of escaping from his range, as if exposing all of the youth’s mysterious arts under its rays.

“Feiliu, stop!” shouted Mei Changsu. Xiao Jingrui quickly collected himself and followed suit, calling, “Commander Meng, please stop!”

Feiliu had always obeyed the commands of Mei Changsu without question. He immediately withdrew his sword and took a step back. His opponent did not press on and likewise stopped his attacks, though he remained on guard.

“Jingrui, what’s going on?” questioned an imposing voice. Xiao

Jingrui finally realized that his father was present as well. The Marquess was standing in the southeastern corner of the courtyard, as if preventing Feiliu from entering the inner courtyard.

“Please forgive me, Marquess.” Mei Changsu stepped forward slowly and bowed. “This is a guard of mine. He is rather poor of conduct, and tends to go in and out without regard for customs. I am to blame for neglecting his discipline, and am willing to bear any punishment.”

Xiao Jingrui also hurried forward to explain, “This is definitely a misunderstanding. Feiliu always enjoys flying about, but he would never harm anyone as long as he isn’t provoked...”

His face still dark, Xie Yu interrupted his son’s words and spoke to Mei Changsu, “Mr. Su is a guest of ours, and naturally we would never inflict insult upon you. However, I’m afraid that this habit of your attendant must be changed, or a similar misunderstanding will repeat in the future.”

“You are absolutely right, Marquess. I will definitely be stricter in my discipline.”

Xie Yu made a sound of approval, and finally turned towards Feiliu’s opponent. Surprisingly, he gave a slight bow. He said apologetically, “Commander Meng came today as a guest. I did not expect to disturb you in this skirmish. Please accept my apologies.”

Commander Meng was about forty years old, tall with a solid build and firm features. His eyes were bright and piercing, yet refined. When he saw the Marquess of Ning coming over to apologize, he immediately waved his hand and said easily, “I was only surprised by this youth’s peculiar movements. He dared to fly across the manor of a Marquess, all the while remaining undetected by the guards. I thought he was some criminal with evil intents, so I decided to lend you a hand, Marquess. Since it was a misunderstanding, let’s just think of it as sparring.” He eyed Mei

Changsu with curiosity, “If I may ask, who are you, sir?”

“My name is Su Zhe. I was acquainted with Mr. Xiao during my travels, and am lucky to be considered a friend. I came the capital for a short stay on his generous hospitality.”

“Su Zhe?” Commander Meng rolled the name over his tongue, and looked towards Feiliu, a youth who seemed so inconspicuous at first glance. He chuckled, “Mr. Su must be an exceptional man to have such a guard.”

“Not at all.” Mei Changsu smiled calmly. “I only happened to save Feiliu once from some misfortunes, and he decided to remain by my side in gratitude. I do not possess any outstanding characteristics to command such a skilled fighter.”

“Is that so?” One could not perceive whether or not he believed the explanation from his unchanging expression, but he did not pursue further. Xie Yu gave Xiao Jingrui a long look, but remained silent as well. He invited Commander Meng to take tea in the main hall, and the two left side by side.

As soon as they left, Xiao Jingrui slapped his forehead. He stomped in frustration and said, “Oh no oh no! My father is suspicious now. He’ll definitely call me over tonight to inquire after your real identity. What should I do?”

In contrast, Mei Changsu remained calm. He answered casually, “Just say I’m a friend you met during travels, and you don’t know anything else.”

“It’s not that simple!” grimaced Xiao Jingrui. “Do you know who that Commander Meng is?”

Mei Changsu’s eyes became slightly more focused. He sighed, “How many Commander Mengs could there be in the capital, who can receive such respect from the Marquess of Ning and possess such great skills in martial arts? He is, of course, the great general who commands the fifty thousand Royal Guards, Commander

Meng Zhi.”

“Who is he, besides being the commander of the Royal Guards?”

“He is second in rankings to Xuan Bu of the Yu empire. I suppose he is currently the number one warrior of our empire...”

“Exactly. Think about it, a guard of yours could actually go neck to neck with the greatest warrior of Liang...”

“But Commander Meng didn’t even use his full power...”

“True, he wasn’t going all out. Even so, he’s still the greatest warrior of Liang. It’s astonishing that Feiliu can exchange so many blows with him without defeat. You know what kind of person my father is, there’s no way he’d believe you’re just an ordinary guest. Besides, even if I keep my mouth shut, my father will simply call Xie Bi and the truth will come tumbling out!”

“That’s true.” Mei Changsu tilted his head and thought for a moment. “Forget about it. If your father inquires further, then just tell him the truth. He’s only worried that you brought home someone with a mysterious background. It’ll be fine once it’s cleared up for him. It’s not as if I’m some criminal, I’m only hiding my identity to avoid disturbance. I can’t have you lying and deceiving your father just to conceal me.”

Xiao Jingrui felt very apologetic, and responded with embarrassment, “Su, I’m really sorry. But don’t worry, my father is a discreet man of few words. Even if he learns about your true identity, it’ll only be so that he can understand the situation. He won’t speak about it to others.”

“How could you be blamed? It’s my fault for being too relaxed recently and not thinking things through, thus allowing Feiliu to make a scene...” At those words, Mei Changsu saw Feiliu lower his head with apprehension. He quickly moved to comfort Feiliu, softly patting on the head, and coaxed gently, “No no, it’s not Feiliu’s fault. It’s because of that uncle. He stopped you, so you got

into a fight, right?”

Feiliu nodded.

“That’s why, our Feiliu was not wrong at all! It was that uncle’s fault.”

Xiao Jingrui began to sweat again. Who disciplines a child like that?

“But you know, if Feiliu wants to go out in the future, you should walk out through the front door. When you return, you need to walk in through the front door as well. You can’t run around on the walls and rooftops like usual. The people here are very timid, but their eyes are very sharp. If they accidentally see Feiliu, they’ll be very scared... Okay?”

“Kay.”

Xiao Jingrui couldn’t help but think to himself, Feiliu probably wouldn’t mature with this sort of education even if he did not have a head injury.

Mei Changsu did not seem concerned about the commotion. He brought Feiliu back to the Snow Cottage, and passed the time with music and games just as leisurely as before. On the contrary, Xiao Jingrui was anxious all day, thinking about this and that.

Sure enough, Xie Yu called Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi to his study at night. He went straight to the point and asked, “What is the background of that Mr. Su you’ve invited here?”

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi looked at each other. They knew that their father’s suspicions must’ve been raised to question them like that. It would be impossible to conceal the truth. Not to mention, how could they, as sons, defy their father? There was a brief pause, and Xie Bi blurted out the truth, “Su... His real name...is Mei Changsu. I believe Father has heard of him. He is the current chief of the world’s largest clan, the East River Alliance...”

Xie Yu was shocked. He was frozen for a long time. Finally, he

replied, “No wonder a mere guard of his is so skilled... So he is the top rank of Langya, Mr. Mei of East River...”

Chapter 7 (Modified Version)

Top rank of Langya, Mr. Mei of East River.

Xie Yu was descended from an ancient noble family and possessed the high rank of Marquess, but it was impossible for him to be unimpressed by this title.

“He glitters in the distance like ice, like snow. Serenely, a subtle fragrance floats along the winding river. Recognizing all heroes of this world, at the head of East River is Mr. Mei.”¹ This was the poem recited by Chief Shu Qitian of the northern superpower Cliff Dragon Sect when he first met Mei Changsu nine years ago.

At the time, the Gongsun family entered the East River area while fleeing from assassination. Shu Qitian crossed the river in chase. The newly appointed Chief of the East River Alliance, Mei Changsu, arrived in person at the riverside to greet Shu Qitian. The two men, unarmed and without guards, had a private discussion at the summit of Mt. He. After two days, Shu Qitian descended the mountain to return to the north, the Gongsun family was saved, and the River East Alliance’s fame spread throughout the lands.

“The Chief of the River East Alliance has always kept a low profile. Hardly anyone has ever seen him... How did you two become acquainted with him?” asked Xie Yu after pondered for a moment.

“It was my brother...” stammered Xie Bi. Xiao Jingrui took over, “Yes, Father. Last winter, I passed by Mt. Qin in my travels and was resting at a teahouse. Coincidentally, Su was sitting at the next table. He was staring at a branch of plum blossoms² I was holding, and seemed as if he really liked it. I gifted the plum blossoms to him without much thought, and we became acquainted. I was often under his care as I was journeying thereafter. Su has a frail body, and is in poor health. The elderly doctor, Dr. Xun Zhen told

him that he must leave East River and ignore the affairs within his alliance in order to focus on recovery. So, I took this opportunity to invite him for a short stay in Jinling... As Father knows, Su's fame is too widespread. He decided to use the alias Su Zhe in order to maintain a tranquil lifestyle..."

"So that's how it is..." Xie Yu nodded. "No matter. Mr. Su is an honoured guest. You two must take good care of him."

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi bowed together dutifully, and slowly walked out.

As soon as they left their father's study, Xie Bi grabbed Xiao Jingrui with inquiries. He finally learned about Feiliu's fight with Commander Meng, and tutted in amazement. The two went to the Snow Cottage to inform Mei Changsu about their father learning his real identity. The Chief of the East River Alliance merely smiled faintly, and didn't pay it much mind.

The next day in the early morning, the Empress's nephew Yan Yujin came over finely dressed. He announced, "Su's weariness from his travels should have been rested by now. So today, let's all go out to play." He dragged Xiao Jingrui and Mei Changsu out, and left behind Xie Bi, who was swamped in work with resentful eyes.

The tournament for Princess Nihuang's hand in marriage was nearing, so the capital was blooming with talented young men from all over the lands. All the restaurants and teahouses were bustling with business. Occasionally, there would be some exciting brawls, as if people were taking the first round of eliminations into their own hands. The drama-loving Yan Yujin found all of this highly entertaining, and had been running around to watch shows since the day he returned. When he brought Xiao Jingrui and Mei Changsu out with him, he could already introduce with authority the restaurants with the most duels, and the teahouses with the highest level fighters.

They watched a day's worth of brawls, and hardly saw any skilled

fighters. (Of course, the real masters of martial arts would never make a spectacle of themselves by joining this mess.) Yan Yujin was still in high spirits, but Xiao Jingrui has been bored for quite some time. Normally, he would try to hang in there for his good friend's enjoyment, but today they came with Mei Changsu. Once he saw him beginning to show signs of weariness, he immediately rejected Yan Yujin's suggestion to go play in another restaurant.

"Why not? That place is really fun. I went there a few days ago, and saw someone with a morning star fighting another with dual swords. The person didn't strike properly with his morning star, and it ended up flying back. He hit himself on the forehead and fainted. Oh, I had such a great laugh..."

Xiao Jingrui reminded him quietly, "Yujin, Su is tired."

"Eh?" Yan Yujin saw Mei Changsu's pale face and smacked himself. "I was too thoughtless. Su is sick, of course he would be different from us. Why don't we rest here then? The food here is pretty good. Should I order some signature dishes for you to try out, Su?"

"We had snacks not more than two hours ago, how would we have room for more food?" Mei Changsu leaned back in his chair. Though he appeared weary, he still had some vigor. "Let's sit for awhile then each go home. Even though we came out to play, we can't be too extreme. We should let Jingrui return home to eat dinner with his family."

"That's true, Xiao Jingrui is a good child," said Yan Yujin approvingly. "Unlike me. My father does not care in the least about what time I return home..."

Although he spoke in a light-hearted manner, Mei Changsu still detected a hint of loneliness. He turned to take a deep look at Yan Yujin. Xiao Jingrui didn't notice, being too familiar with him. Instead, he waved his hand for a server and ordered him to go rent a clean pillowed litter³.

A while later, the litter arrived, and the three parted ways in front of the restaurant. Yan Yujin continued to wander around, and Xiao Jingrui accompanied Mei Changsu to return to the Manor of the Marquess of Ning.

While they were exiting the litter in front of the manor, a servant who saw them in the distance ran inside to announce their return. Xie Bi rushed out to greet them immediately after. He called out as soon as he saw the two, “Why were you out for so long? Someone wants to see you. They’ve been waiting for quite awhile now!”

Xiao Jingrui’s response to Xie Bi’s complaints was an immediate inquiry, “Who wants to see us?” On the other hand, Mei Changsu paused his footsteps, and a hint of hesitation flashed between his brows. But, it was only for a brief moment, and he quickly recovered his calm demeanor.

Xie Bi took some measured glances at the two’s outfits and said hurriedly, “It’s passable, you don’t need to change. Hurry up and come in with me. The Empress, Mother, and Princess Nihuang wants to see you.”

Xiao Jingrui was shocked. The three women Xie Bi spoke of could be considered the most noble and powerful women within the Liang empire. The Empress reigned over the Inner Palace⁴, and was the mother of the empire. Princess Liyang was the sister of the Emperor and the wife of the Marquess of Ning. Although Princess Nihuang had a lower status, she commanded the ten thousand cavalry units at the empire’s southern border. It was rare to see even one of the three, not to mention having them especially waiting here together. It’s safe to say that nobody has ever been received at such a rare gathering before.

“What are you doing so dazed?” Xie Bi gave his brother a poke, “It’s okay if you don’t want to go in. They mainly want to meet Su anyway.”

“Just listen to yourself.” Xiao Jingrui glared at Xie Bi unhappily,

“Did you pique their curiosity by being too talkative and telling them about the fight between Feiliu and Commander Meng? Did you forget that Su is here to recover from his illness? He is not here to acquaint all the nobles. Will he still be able to relax peacefully if he is placed in the limelight?”

Xie Bi felt rather ashamed after being reprimanded, and apologized with embarrassment, “It was my fault. I accidentally let it slip while entertaining the guests with Mother. Please forgive me, Su.”

“No no,” said Mei Changsu. He spoke with indifference, “I should be thankful that Young Master Xie is introducing me to nobles. Who knows, when I greet them in a little while, the Empress will perhaps reward me with treasures in place of Prince Yu.”

Notes:

[1\]](#) The poem is pretty vague. The gist of it is praising Mei Changsu for his beauty and serene air, then naming him as the leader of East River. Poems are hard to translate. :(

[2\]](#) Perhaps by design or perhaps by chance, Mei Changsu’s surname “Mei” refers to the plum blossom.

[3\]](#) A carriage carried by humans.

[4\]](#) The location for the Emperor’s harem.

Chapter 8 (Modified Version)

Xie Bi was shocked by Mei Changsu's words. His heart dropped. He raised his eyes, and saw that while Mei Changsu was wearing a light smile, but his eyes did not show a hint of laughter. Xie Bi knew his little scheme has been seen through by this extraordinarily intelligent Chief of the East River Alliance. He felt thoroughly embarrassed, and thought desperately for a way to explain himself.

Due to Xiao Jingrui's special circumstances, he spent the majority of his life travelling outside of the capital, especially after he came of age. He was never involved in politics. Yet even so, he was still a son of a Marquess, and had some basic knowledge of the major powers in the Royal Court. When he heard the words of Mei Changsu and saw Xie Bi's expression, a bit of contemplation made the situation clear for him. He was furious. Xiao Jingrui marched forward to shield Mei Changsu behind him and told Xie Bi loudly, "Go inform the Empress and Mother, Su is unwell and cannot go greet them."

"What are you doing, brother?" Xie Bi tried to push him aside hastily. "Stop causing trouble. Do you think the people waiting in the main hall are just average guests? You can't simply see them if you want to, and refuse if you don't."

Xiao Jingrui tightened his jaw. He gripped onto Xie Bi's arm and summoned his inner energy, rendering his brother unable to move. He stared right into Xie Bi's eyes and spoke with seriousness, "I believe that Mother and Princess Nihuang are only curious. The one who really wants to meet Su is the Empress, right? So, I will say this again. Please go inform the Empress, Su is unwell and does not wish to lose his bearings in front of Her Majesty, and asks for her forgiveness."

Xie Bi struggled against Xiao Jingrui's grasp with great strength, but was unable to free himself. He flushed with embarrassment

and annoyance. Although Xie Bi referred to Xiao Jingrui with “brother”, and a close brotherly bond really existed between the two, Xie Bi never truly viewed or respected Xiao Jingrui as a real elder brother. Xiao Jingrui was gentle and modest in nature. He had always been yielding to his siblings, never ordered them around as an elder brother, and always forgave any light bullying he received. He was especially never stern with Xie Bi, the heir. His sudden tough attitude was a surprise to Xie Bi, who was not accustomed to such.

Mei Changsu walked forward and spoke with reluctance, “Nevermind, Jingrui. I will—” He did not finish before Xiao Jingrui retorted without even turning, “No! Absolutely not!”

“Brother!!”

“I don’t care what you were thinking when you invited Su to Jinling. All I know is that I invited him to rest and recuperate. These struggles have nothing to do with him.” Xiao Jingrui’s eyes were firm and unyielding. “Prince Yu or the Crown Prince, whatever stance you wish to take, whomever you wish to side with, that is your business. Father has let you be, and so will I, to an even greater degree. However, Su is not involved in the affairs of the Royal Court. Even if he controls the world’s greatest clan, even if he possesses appointable talent, you cannot invite him on false premises and scheme to involve him in the conflict like this, with no regard for his thoughts. Even if Su was a stranger, your actions are against moral character. Not to mention, you must possess at least some friendly feelings towards him through our travels together, no?”

Xie Bi had never heard such sharp words from Xiao Jingrui before. Besides, he was in the wrong, and so was naturally less imposing. He mumbled a retort, “It’s just to meet the Empress, he doesn’t have to decide anything...”

“Just to meet the Empress?” Xiao Jingrui chuckled coldly, “If it wasn’t for Su’s vast knowledge and his status as the Chief of the

East River Alliance, why would the Empress wish to meet him out of the blue? Should the Empress present the honour of recruitment on behalf of Prince Yu during the meeting, how should Su respond? If the Empress bestows some exceptionally expensive gifts, do you want Su to accept or refuse? Without Su's approval, you've unreasonably placed him in a difficult situation. Are your actions befitting that of a friend?"

Xie Bi's expression began to falter after being so fiercely reprimanded. His expression was full of embarrassment, and veins were appearing on his forehead. Xiao Jingrui softened upon seeing this. He lowered his tone and continued slowly, "Brother, the family has always relied on your care and great efforts. I haven't provided you with a lot of help, and for that I feel apologetic. I know that everything you do is for the Xie family. Regardless, we cannot treat a friend like this. If Yujin learns of this, he would yell at you too. I am going to accompany Su to the Snow Cottage now. As for the Empress... I believe that with your clever wit, you'll be able to resolve the situation." After that, he turned to grab Mei Changsu, and left without so much as a backwards glance.

Xie Bi stood dumbstruck for a bit. Finally, he sighed, and did not dare to follow.

Once they returned to the Snow Cottage, Mei Changsu sat down on the long chair beneath the tree as usual. Xiao Jingrui poured him a cup of hot tea, and brought a stool close by. He sat quietly for a long time. Finally, he said in a low voice, "Sorry..."

Mei Changsu's eyes slowly rested upon the face of Xiao Jingrui. This young man of two families had now regained his usual warmth. His face was gentle and his eyes were clear, completely devoid of the fierceness and determination from before. Yet, as he watched him, Mei Changsu felt a shock that was difficult to articulate.

Mei Changsu originally thought Xiao Jingrui to be a simple and kind child. He never imagined this young man to possess such firm

and resolute principles on friendship and moral character.

He did not wish to go meet the Empress currently, but he most likely would've been able to handle the situation if they had to meet. Still, he couldn't help but be touched when Xiao Jingrui stepped forward to block his path, protecting him without any reservations.

If everyone in the world can be like Xiao Jingrui, then the world may become a much better place. Unfortunately, too many people cannot do that, including himself...

"Su, please don't be upset with Xie Bi... He did not actually act in malice. He has always supported Prince Yu, and he truly admires your knowledge." Xiao Jingrui couldn't discern Mei Changsu's expression and felt a bit uneasy. "Your motive for coming to Jinling was to leave behind the disputes of the Alliance, and yet we're making you face such a mess now..."

Mei Changsu gave a slight smile. He reached out and patted Xiao Jingrui on the knee, speaking quietly, "Being upset would be too much... I know that everyone has their own reasons for the actions they take, and Xie Bi is no different. Unfortunately, everyone tends to think too much about themselves. Many annoyances in the world are born this way. This is the same anywhere in the world. The Yan and Yu are spilling blood over their thrones, how could our Liang empire be any different?"

"Before you came to Jinling, you said that you needed to hide your identity." Xiao Jingrui hung his head and looked very disheartened. "I clearly promised you, yet I couldn't fulfill it..."

"How could you be blamed for this? It originated from my mistake. I forgot to tell Feiliu to be careful..."

Xiao Jingrui shook his head and said gravely, "Su, you don't need to pretend to be blind to the truth to spare my feelings. After today's events, we should all understand that even if Feiliu did not fight with Commander Meng yesterday, Xie Bi would still reveal

your true identity to Prince Yu...”

“All right then, why don’t we flee the capital under the veil of darkness?” joked Mei Changsu, trying to relax the mood.

“Su!!” Xiao Jingrui cried out, mixed between worry and laughter.

“All right now, stop worrying.” Mei Changsu laughed and leaned back on his chair. “What has happened happened, and everything will turn out fine. Both parties are desperately recruiting talented individuals. Since I unfortunately struck their fancy, I would only bring the troubles back to East River if I run back, and then get scolded by the people there for being a harbinger of disaster. It would be better to stay in the capital and watch the drama unfold. Once they’ve inspected me for a few more days, they’ll discover that I am just a useless scholar. Then, they wouldn’t take me in even if I went to seek them out.”

Xiao Jingrui knew that the situation wasn’t as simple as Mei Changsu claimed, but he was still amused into laughter, and his low spirits were wiped away.

In the end, the refusal did not stir up any trouble. The Empress and Princess Nihuang went off peacefully. It seems that Xie Bi really was rather outstanding in his ways. The dinner scene was very peaceful as well. Neither the Marquess of Ning nor Princess Liyang mentioned anything regarding their guest at the Snow Cottage. Xie Bi was even quieter, and returned to his quarters after a few bites. Xiao Jingrui followed soon after to check up on him. Xie Bi did not get angry with his brother, only requesting Xiao Jingrui to apologize to Su in his stead. Then, he used the excuse of feeling unwell and went to sleep early.

The next day, Yan Yujin came over again for more adventures, and found with surprise that nobody seemed very spirited. He immediately suspected that he missed out on some great event. He went straight to questioning Xiao Jingrui, but was not able to pry out any information after struggling for half a day. Thankfully, he

finally remembered that the tournament to choose Princess Nihuang's husband would begin the next day, and that he must rest and retain his energy to strive for his goal of winning the maiden. He finally stopped tormenting his best friend and returned home wearily.

Chapter 9 (Modified Version)

Outside the Vermillion Bird Gate of the Jinling palace stood a towering building. It was constructed in the style of the Royal Family with decorated beams and sparkling tiles. This ceremonial building was named "Phoenix". Since the time of the third Emperor, all celebrations such as marriage and coming-of-age within the royal family of Liang were held there while congratulations were received from thousands of citizens. Even though Princess Nihuang was not directly related to the Emperor, her famous deeds are unmatched, and her prestigious name was well-known. She generally received special honour in the Royal Court higher than that of the Emperor's daughters. This tournament for her husband was naturally held in the Phoenix Building.

One month ago, the Emperor ordered the Department of Construction to erect a platform in the huge square before the Phoenix Building. Surrounding the platform was a circle of colourful damask tents for the nobility to sit beneath. Normal officials and other significant people were to sit scattered outside the tented area. As for regular citizens, they would of course be blocked outside the guarded premise. They will not be able to attend the grand occasion, and can only wait from afar for hints of news while chatting to relieve boredom.

Although the people who can personally see the tournament in its entirety were few in number, the importance of this event was self-evident. It could even be said that the attentive eyes of the whole world were all directed upon the platform outside the Vermillion Bird Gate, waiting for this most thrilling competition to begin.

The victor would be able to obtain the world's most difficult to conquer, but also most brilliant woman.

The family of the Marquess of Ning were of course guests under

the damask tents with their status. Everyone originally planned to go see this huge event together, but Xiao Jingrui was uncertain about bringing Mei Changsu to such a public occasion due to the increasing complications from the past two days. He was immersed in hesitation. The man in question was rather unconcerned about his dilemma. Mei Changsu did not express an interest in attending, and did not pronounce his plan to stay. Instead, as if watching a show, he looked on as Xiao Jingrui paced back and forth while frowning in contemplation, and spent his other attentions happily entertaining Feiliu.

“What’re you guys doing? It’s so late and you guys haven’t even left yet!” Following this complaint was of course the Empress’s nephew, Yan Yujin. He wore a new outfit in pale lilac, and adorned his hair with a silver circlet, appearing very handsome. He stood at the entrance of the Snow Cottage and called boldly, “Hurry up! In an hour, even the Emperor will begin to leave from his quarters. What’re you dallying around for?”

Xiao Jingrui sighed, “I was debating about the attendance today.”

“Of course we’re attending! We won’t get our turn on stage today, but we did sign up, so we should at least go observe our future opponents.”

“I’m not talking about me. I’m talking about Su—”

“Su needs to go all the more. If you’re not even going to bring Su to such a huge event, then what entertainments will you take him to in the capital?”

“You don’t understand...” Xiao Jingrui’s expression remained heavy. He roughly explained the troubles of last night and continued, “All the important people will be present in this sort of occasion. Who knows what will happen if Su attends?”

Yan Yujin tilted his head and thought for a moment, then laughed. “If that’s the case, then all the more reason to go. If you make Su stay in the Snow Cottage, you can’t guarantee that the

Crown Prince and Prince Yu won't come visiting later with some excuses. Then, it'll be a muddled mess of who came first and who came later, who said what and who gifted what. It's the perfect opportunity today in front of the crowd for Su to meet everyone he needs to meet. He can use this opportunity to express his disinterest in recruitment. This way, nobody would be able to say anything about being the first to reach him. It'll be more convenient for the future."

Mei Changsu stopped arranging Feiliu's headband. He raised his head and gave Yan Yujin a look of admiration. This young master did not like schemes, yet he could always see straight to the heart of the matter. One can't deny his natural talent.

"What you said makes sense." Xiao Jingrui did not like to think about these political trickeries either, and only thought about it for a whole morning for Mei Changsu. His head had been aching for awhile, so these words from Yan Yujin convinced him immediately. His whole body felt a lot more relaxed. "Shall we leave after Su finishes any preparations he requires?"

"No need." Mei Changsu stood up, supported by Feiliu's hand. "Feiliu and I are not requesting marriage, so what's the need for dressing up? Let's go. Xie Bi should be tired of waiting outside as well."

"Eh? How did you know that Xie Bi was outside? I didn't mention that just now did I?" Yan Yujin was very surprised.

"I guessed." Mei Changsu smiled simply, and was the first to leave the Snow Cottage. Xie Bi was indeed waiting under an old willow tree outside the courtyard. He hurried forward to greet the group when he saw them coming out.

"Su, regarding two nights ago, it was my—"

"Why speak more about the matter?" Mei Changsu's smile was light and gentle, without any hint of anger. "I did not mind. You don't need to take it to heart either."

The two met eyes and smiled, and indeed spoke no more about that matter. On one hand, Xiao Jingrui had deep brotherly love for Xie Bi. On the other, he held great respect for Mei Changsu. When he saw that there were no hard feelings between them, he felt as if the dark clouds have parted. He was extraordinarily happy that the atmosphere has returned to the peace he hoped for, and he was full of smiles.

They rode in a horse carriage to the Vermillion Bird Gate, which was already teeming with people when they arrived. Almost all the high officials and nobility in the capital have mingled here. Everyone was busy exchanging greetings and pleasantries with all their family, friends, and colleagues. The place was bustling like a market. The group shielded Mei Changsu between them, and greeted people nonstop all around them. The torrent of greetings relented slightly only when they reached the tented area.

The damask tents for the Yan and Xie families were not located at the same place. However, the Marquess of Ning and Princess Liyang were both accompanying the Emperor upon the Phoenix Building. So, Yan Yujin came to sit with the group, saying the more the merrier. Feiliu was not appearing and disappearing as usual. Instead, he stuck close to Mei Changsu's side and stared at every person who got close. His icy aura sent chills down the three noble gentlemen close by.

When it was nearing noon, the bell atop the Phoenix Building rang suddenly, sounding nine long and five short rings to announce the Emperor. There was immediate silence below the building, with only the sound of a ceremonial official directing the crowd to bow to the Emperor.

Gazing up from the circle of damask tents, one would see a field of magnificent fans, pearl crowns, and damask robes beyond the railings of the Phoenix Building. Aside from deriving that the Emperor must be sitting outside the main building based on positioning, it was basically impossible to identify anyone by face.

The situation was different for the people sitting atop the building, who were able to see everything clearly from high above.

The ceremonial official had led the first fifty competitors up on the stage. They bowed to the Emperor, and each person's name was declared before they descended the stage. They were ordered and paired through ballots. Finally, the competition officially began.

Mei Changsu was not skilled in combat due to his health. However, as the Chief of the world's largest clan, he was very knowledgeable in the various schools of martial arts. He patiently answered all the inquiries from the three young men in the shared tent. Even though the competition upon stage was not yet spectacular, the atmosphere within the tent was very lively.

Just as the first three rounds ended, the first of the many expected visitors arrived.

What astonished everyone was that this particular visitor was someone completely unexpected.

Chapter 10 (Modified Version)

“Are all my young masters enjoying themselves today?” The person paid no attention to the apparent astonishment of the people within the tents. His body was slightly bowed, and his face was full of smiles. He swung the long brush he was holding and bowed in greeting.

“Ah, you flatter us. Please sit, Eunuch Gao.” Xie Bi was a regular in the Royal Court, and was the first to react. He rushed forward to stop the eunuch in his bow.

“Oh, there’s no need to sit.” Gao Zhan was an old confidant of the Emperor, having personally served His Majesty for more than thirty years. He had long since been promoted to the Head Eunuch of the Royal Palace, yet remained humble in his manners and actions. He did not show any sign of discourtesy to these children who were his junior by decades. He said, smiling, “Please follow me. The Grand Empress Dowager wishes to see you.”

“The Grand Empress Dowager?” Xie Bi was startled. “Her Majesty is here as well?”

“That’s right. The Grand Empress Dowager is upon the Phoenix Building. Her Majesty saw you youngsters enjoying yourselves, and asked you to join her.”

“All of us?”

“Yes. This mister and this young man, all of you.”

Xie Bi turned around, and the group looked at each other. This Grand Empress Dowager was the official grandmother¹ of the Emperor, and was past the venerable age of ninety. She never participated in politics, and enjoyed a long life from the carefree lifestyle. The Empress Dowager had passed away for many years, and she was still leading an enjoyable life. She loved being surrounded by the younger generation, so it was not surprising for

her to summon them. However, nobody thought that she would still be able to see the people sitting below with her aging eyes.

Astonished or not, not even the Emperor can refuse summons from the Grand Empress Dowager. The group straightened their clothes. They followed Gao Zhan out the tent and entered the Phoenix Building from the side stairs.

The Grand Empress Dowager was not at the main building. Rather, she was sitting in a warm hall that was sheltered from the wind. Upon entering, the group saw a white-haired old lady leaning upon a soft couch. Her face was filled with wrinkles and kindness. Four people sat by her side amidst a group of maids and eunuchs.

Mei Changsu's eyes flickered slightly, and confirmed the identities of these four people.

Upon the main seat sat the official wife of the Emperor, Empress Yan. She was donned in yellow robes and a phoenix crown. There were already wrinkles by her eyes and mouth, and only a hint of her youthful beauty remained. At the right of the Empress was a beautiful well-groomed madam. She was also past forty, but was evidently better maintained with her bright skin. This was the birth mother of the Crown Prince, Noble Consort Yue. At the left of the Empress sat a more dignified middle-aged madam. Her beautiful eyes were a bit familiar. It was, of course, Princess Liyang. The last person was a young lady. Her clothes were simple, and her makeup was light. Although her features were not breathtaking, she possessed a heroic air and bright spirit. None of the noble madams dressed in finery could surpass her in presence. Who else besides Princess Nihuang could possess such a demeanor?

“Are they here?” asked the Grand Empress Dowager. She sat up shakily, happiness spreading across her face. “Quick, call them here. Tell me, who are these children?”

Yan Yujin couldn't resist a smile, and was glared at by Empress

Yan.

Due to her old age, the Grand Empress Dowager had become a bit confused within recent years. Even though she enjoyed the company of young ones, she cannot remember who was who. Sometimes she would see someone one day and need to be reintroduced the next.

Gao Zhan led the group forward. Mei Changsu was coaxing Feiliu quietly. “In a bit, let’s allow the grandma to hold your hand, okay? Let’s smile for the grandma, okay?”

Feiliu’s face was cold, revealing an unwilling expression.

The Grand Empress Dowager was already holding the hand of Xiao Jingrui, who was closest to her. Gao Zhan hurriedly introduced from the side, “This is the eldest son of the Marquess of Ning, Xiao Jingrui.”

“Little Rui, have you married yet?” asked the old lady kindly.

“Not yet...”

“Oh. You need to hurry!”

“Yes...”

She patted Xiao Jingrui on the head, then turned to hold Xie Bi’s hand.

“This is the second son of the Marquess of Ning, Xie Bi.”

“Little Bi, have you married yet?”

“No...”

“You need to hurry!”

“Yes...”

Next, the Grand Empress Dowager motioned towards Feiliu. Mei Changsu hastily pushed him forward. The youth’s face was cold. He let the old lady grab his hand reluctantly.

“This young man is named Feiliu...” Gao Zhan introduced after

quickly asking Xie Bi.

“Little Fei, have you married yet?”

“No!”

“You need to hurry!”

“N—” Mei Changsu quickly stepped forward and covered his mouth before Feiliu could say “no”. The Grand Empress Dowager’s attention immediately turned to Mei Changsu. She pulled over his hand and looked at him with a smile.

“This is Mr. Su, Su Zhe,” said Gao Zhan.

“Little Shu,” asked the Grand Empress Dowager with a bit of a lisp, “Have you married yet?”

“No.”

“You need to hurry!”

“...”

The last person to be pulled over was Yan Yujin. After being introduced by Gao Zhan, the Grand Empress Dowager asked as usual, “Little Jin, have you married yet?”

Yan Yujin blinked and answered mischievously, “Yes, I’m married.”

The Grand Empress Dowager paused slightly as if still processing the response, but she quickly followed with a new question, “Do you have a child yet?”

Yan Yujin blanked, and murmured, “Not yet...”

“You need to hurry!”

“...”

Empress Yan stepped forward and spoke respectfully, “Grandmother, do you want the children to sit with you for a bit?”

“Yes, yes.” The Grand Empress Dowager was very happy. She

waved her hand, “Come sit. Little Shu, sit by great-grandma. Little Rui and little Bi, sit here. Little Jin, don’t stand there. Little Fei is too far...”

Surrounded by young ones, the old lady was very pleased. She ordered plate after plate of exquisite fruits and snacks and divided them between the group as if they were young children. She watched them eat from the side and laughed with delight.

The Grand Empress Dowager was of high age after all. Even though she was feeling joyful, she began to tire soon. Empress Yan and Princess Liyang began to fear for her health. Together, they coaxed and lied, finally convincing the Grand Empress Dowager to return to her palace and rest. The group was thus finally let out.

Mei Changsu thought that this unusual summons thus end smoothly. He relaxed slightly and walked out the warm hall with the rest. However, just as the party reached the stairs, a pleasant female voice behind them called out, “Mr. Su, please wait.”

She only called for “Mr. Su” to wait, but as one could imagine, everyone stopped and turned around in unison.

Notes:

[1\]](#) She was the official wife of the current Emperor’s grandfather. She is not necessarily related to the Emperor by blood.

Chapter 11 (Modified Version)

Princess Nihuang walked over gracefully, surrounded by an air of power. She walked straight to Mei Changsu and paid no mind to the many pairs of eyes on her. She smiled and said, “The warm hall is too stuffy, it does not suit someone from the battlefields like me. If Mr. Su does not object, would you join me for a walk along the corridor and see how the tournament below is progressing?”

Ignoring the fact that this was the famous Princess Nihuang, there would be no reason to refuse even if she were an average lady. So, Mei Changsu smiled and accepted. He quietly left instructions for Feiliu and accompanied the Princess, strolling towards the long corridor outside the warm hall.

Feiliu stood still with a cold expression, his eyes staring straight off into the distance. It was as if he turned into a statue. The other three gentlemen couldn't exactly turn into statues like him, and stood conflicted at the stairway. Should they leave? But they were worried about Mei Changsu. Should they stay? But this was not a place where they may simply idle. While they were hesitating, Eunuch had walked over. He said, all smiles, “The Princess has kept him behind as a guest. What are my young masters worried about? Please rest in the tents below. It would be much too restrictive for you to stand here, no?”

His words were tactful, but his meaning was clear. There was no other choice. The three could only walk down the stairs. What surprised them was that even though Gao Zhan had always lived within the depths of the Royal Palace, he appeared to be very clear about Feiliu's identity. Even though he chased away the three noble young men of high status, he paid no mind to this cold youth and allowed him to stand like a pole at the stairway.

Meanwhile, Mei Changsu had accompanied Princess Nihuang to the outer corridor. The two stood side by side and watched the lively combat upon the stage below.

“Mr. Su.” Light sparkled in Princess Nihuang’s eyes, which rested upon Mei Changsu. She asked, “I awaited your presence at the Manor of the Marquess of Ning yesterday, only to hear that we were unable to meet you as you were unwell. As I see you today, it seems that you have recovered?”

“Yes, I have recovered.” Mei Changsu answered without care. He did not have a hint of the awkwardness resulting from a false excuse being uncovered.

“I wanted to admire how Mr. Mei of East River would respond to the honour of recruitment from the Empress. A pity.” Princess Nihuang looked at him with greater interest. “Do you know how your predicament came to be?”

“Predicament?” Mei Changsu turned, “Do I have a predicament?”

“I can be certain that when you return to your tent in a little while, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu will go visit you immediately. Do you believe me?”

“I dare not pay disbelief to the words of Your Highness.”

“Don’t you find it strange?” Princess Nihuang’s gaze was like a sword, and her voice was full of pride. “Yes, you command over the world’s largest clan, and the talented name of Mr. Mei of East River is well known. Even so, you still remain a commoner. You should not be able to provide much assistance to the disputes of Court. Yet, why are the Crown Prince and Prince Yu so interested in you?”

Mei Changsu grimaced, “Honestly speaking, I find this very strange indeed. I am very mediocre, and gained some small fame only through the support of my comrades. I do not have any notable accomplishments to deserve such favour from the Princes. Since Your Highness is so insightful, I beg of you to speak with the two Princes. Please tell them that Mei Changsu is too useless to recruit.”

Princess Nihuang laughed brightly. She took a long look at Mei Changsu and followed his eyes into the distance. They gazed at the city resting in mist. After a long moment, she started slowly, “Your predicament...originates from Langya Hall...”

Langya Hall.

It seemed to be the name for a place, or perhaps the name of an organization. From another point of view, it should be more like a store. A store to do business.

The business procedure was as follows. You enter Langya Hall. You ask a question. The Hall Master quotes a price. If you accept this price, then pay. Langya Hall will give you the answer to your question.

There have been people who accused Langya Hall of being a scam, saying “If they cannot answer your question, then Langya Hall will quote an impossible price. Since you can’t pay, they will not need to answer. Isn’t that a scam?”

Even so, carriages lined up like long dragons at Langya Hall, and money flowed into the Hall like rivers. Everyone still believed that whatever you wished to know, you will receive a satisfying answer as long as you bring enough money into Langya Hall.

This authority had never been broken.

“My predicament originates from Langya Hall? What does that mean?” Mei Changsu turned his head and his expression flickered slightly.

“Do you know what comment Langya Hall has for you?”

“Yes,” answered Mei Changsu lightly, “The top rank in the List of Gentlemen. It’s just some fabrication”

“The few annual rankings provided by Langya Hall are free, but they are definitely not fabrications.” Princess Nihuang’s voice was clear. “The world’s ten greatest martial artists, the world’s ten greatest clans, the world’s ten wealthiest people, the world’s ten

greatest gentlemen, and the world's ten most beautiful ladies. Nobody with their name on these major lists is ordinary.”

The corner of Mei Changsu's lips shifted, but he remained silent.

Nobody doubts these five major lists of rankings due to the mysterious and astonishing ability for Langya Hall to collect information. The East River Alliance sits at the top of the ten great clans, and the Chief is the top rank in the List of Gentlemen. Mei Changsu definitely cannot deny that he has an impressive name.

“However... The East River Alliance has been the top clan for years, and this is not the first year for you to be the top rank in the List of Gentlemen either.” Princess Nihuang chuckled softly, “The reason for the Crown Prince and Prince Yu's unusual enthusiasm to recruit you recently is due to a new comment by Langya Hall.”

“What have they said now?” asked Mei Changsu with pain.

“The Crown Prince brought heavy rewards with him to Langya Hall, requesting a recommendation for a prodigy to help govern the world.” Princess Nihuang looked at him with sympathy, “You were unfortunately recommended.”

“He who does not hold a particular office should not plan its duties.” Mei Changsu responded coldly. “Governing the world is still the responsibility of the Emperor right now. What are the others thinking to worry about it in advance? Even if I really am a prodigy as Langya Hall states, shouldn't I only be of use after the new Emperor ascends the throne?”

“Do you really think he wants a prodigy to help the empire? Still, there is no need now to go into what he asked. The answer from Langya Hall is really memorable.” Princess Nihuang spoke slowly, “As far as I know, the answer was thus: ‘Mr. Mei of East River, the qilin¹ prodigy. Obtain him to obtain the world.’”

1] A [mythical beast](#), “said to appear with the imminent arrival or passing of a sage or illustrious ruler. It is a good omen thought to occasion prosperity or serenity. It is often depicted with what looks like fire all over its body.”

Chapter 12 (Modified Version)

“Qilin?” Mei Changsu laughed. “Take a look at me, Princess. Do you think that I have anything to do with the odd-looking creature?”

“You still have the heart to laugh?” Princess Nihuang looked at him with admiration. “Langya Hall has never been wrong with their comments. Of course one would rather believe it to be true than otherwise. This would be a simple matter if it were merely a Prince amassing talent under his command. If you were to refuse, he would not pursue further. However, your predicament turned messy with the comment of ‘qilin prodigy’. Before obtaining you, both Princes will persist in their efforts. However, once one of them succeeds, then the side that failed will inevitably attempt to destroy you with all their powers. Do you feel nothing else for this situation?”

“Of course I do,” responded Mei Changsu seriously. “I feel that the Langya Hall Master must have a grudge against me.”

Princess Nihuang cracked a smile. She half turned and leaned against the railings. Her eyes were shimmering with light. “After meeting with you, I actually believe that perhaps the Langya Hall Master is right once again...”

“Please, Princess.” Mei Changsu bowed hastily, “Your Highness should not have any grudges against me. I am already on a bed of coal, please do not light the fire.”

“This fire has been burning for quite awhile now. I recommend you to pick a side quickly.”

“And therefore be killed quickly by the other?”

“At least this way, one person will protect you with all his might. Isn’t that better than having both of them giving up and trying to kill you together?” Princess Nihuang’s tone suddenly turned cold,

“Who will you pick? The Crown Prince or Prince Yu?”

A look of extreme pride appeared on Mei Changsu’s face. It disappeared in an instance, and he was once again that idle and sickly young man. “A talent must select his lord to perform deeds. Didn’t you come to Jinling to gain achievement?” ask Princess Nihuang slowly.

“How can I think about achievements with this sickly body? I only wanted to rest for a little while.”

“You came to the royal capital to rest?” Princess Nihuang’s eyes looked into the distance. She spoke mockingly, “Mr. Mei of East River is unusual indeed. You really know how to select a place.”

Mei Changsu ignored her ridicule and responded mildly, “Your Highness appears to be unexpectedly concerned about the politics of Court.”

Princess Nihuang whipped her head back. Her clear eyes glared fiercely at Mei Changsu. Her strong presence was like a raging flame under which an average person would immediately cower.

Yet Mei Changsu returned her gaze calmly, a smile lingering on his lips.

After awhile, Princess Nihuang finally withdrew the fury she purposefully emitted. She grunted and answered coldly, “The Mu family has been guarding Yunnan for generations. One can say that it and the Royal Court exist in mutual dependence. The future direction of Court has great impacts on our principality. Why shouldn’t I be concerned?”

“In my opinion,” Mei Changsu bowed, “The changing of the throne had no impact on Yunnan in the past. Regardless of who ascends the throne in the future, the Mu family who guards the southern border would not be touched easily. Why would Your Highness be so concerned with the battle for the throne?”

Princess Nihuang did not answer this question. Instead, she

roared with laughter. Although she was a woman, her bright and spirited demeanor was filled with the pride and dignity of a prince, much worthy of admiration. One could imagine how stunning she would be on the battlefield as she heads an attack like a storm of fire. If the young Prince who recently inherited the title possesses half the grace and dignity of his sister, then it would be more than enough to ensure Yunnan to be the most secure principality of the world.

Mei Changsu moved his brows, and understood this female general of the southern border.

True, the Mu family of Yunnan was loyal to the Court, but the Court also needs to be able to appease them. Princess Nihuang was a hero amongst women. How could she bow her head to just any master? How could she not come to see the character of the future Emperor and how he obtains the throne?

Princess Nihuang turned after restoring her composure. “Mr. Su,” she said, “Would you like to do me a favour?”

Mei Changsu replied hurriedly, “If Your Highness has any instructions, I will endeavour to complete them.”

“The Emperor has given an edict that only the top ten candidates from the martial arts tournament will be qualified to take part in the literary tournament. I would like to ask you to be the examiner in the literary tournament and help me rank the people asking for my hand.”

Mei Changsu was very surprised by this request, and his first reaction was to tactfully decline. “The literary tournament is decided by the Emperor. How could I interject?”

“Mr. Su’s talent is so widely known, His Majesty will not oppose it.” Princess Nihuang gazed into the distance, and there was a hint of softness. “Everyone encourages me to marry, saying that I must do so eventually as a woman. It wouldn’t do any harm to select carefully, would it?”

Mei Changsu pondered for a moment and asked, “Is the ranking in the literary tournament used to determine the order in which they compete with Your Highness?”

“Yes. The victor from the literary tournament will have the first opportunity to compete with me. If he wins, then the following nine will not have a chance.”

“What if he loses?”

“Then the next person will step up. If none of the ten can win against me, then I won’t be married off this time.” Princess Nihuang sneered, as if she had long seen the ending she spoke of. “Will you agree?”

Mei Changsu knew that it would be useless to try to be low-key in such conditions. He wasn’t afraid to take the limelight. He nodded slowly and shifted his gaze upon the stage, where flashes of blades never stopped. He sighed, “It would be great if there was a fated one for Your Highness amongst these men...”

Princess Nihuang stepped closer and stood shoulder to shoulder with him. Her eyes remained upon the battles below. As if speaking to herself, she asked quietly, “Why didn’t you join?”

“Me?” Mei Changsu chuckled. “With a body like mine, I’m afraid I would be sent flying in the first round. By that time, I wouldn’t be able to be a qilin. It would be pretty fortunate if I don’t turn into a pancake...”

Princess Nihuang burst with laughter at his descriptions. “Mr. Su is really humourous. I wonder, what is your ailment?”

“It is just a chronic illness, currently not life-threatening,” answered Mei Changsu smoothly. He continued to watch the crowd below. Suddenly, something made his lashes quiver slightly and his gaze wavered. His movements were minute and disappeared without a trace, but a person like Princess Nihuang noticed immediately. She followed his eyes and searched for

awhile, but couldn't determine what he saw.

"The Phoenix Building is ultimately not a place for me to stay long. If Your Highness has no further instructions, it would be best for me to return to the tents below," said Mei Changsu warmly. "Besides, if the qilin does not return, wouldn't the Crown Prince and Prince Yu become restless in their wait?"

"That is true. It's better for you to see them soon," nodded Princess Nihuang. She smiled, "Then I will not keep you further. Please do as you wish."

Mei Changsu bowed in departure, and the female general who usually does not pay much mind to nobility actually bowed in return. The two went separate ways. One returned to the Warm Hall, and the other went directly down the stairs. Feiliu naturally followed.

A long corridor connected the side exit of the Phoenix Building and the entrance of the tented area. Guards stood attentive outside the walls, and the passage was extraordinarily quiet. Mei Changsu walked slowly with his head lowered in thought. He only raised his head when Feiliu gasped "Ah!" behind him, and saw the strong build walking towards him.

As the Commander of the Royal Guards, Meng Zhi was in charge of the safety of the Royal Palace. His responsibilities were hefty with the Emperor present, and he needed to patrol the area with extra caution. However, as the commander, he of course knew that Mei Changsu entered the Phoenix Building under summons from the Grand Empress Dowager. So, he did not interrogate Mei Changsu as they met, instead greeted him with a smile.

Mei Changsu gave a soft smile as well, and nodded in greeting. The two men each had their business to attend to. It was as if the two met by coincidence. Neither party appeared to have the intention to stop and make small talk.

Yet, in the brief moment when their two shoulders brushed by

each other, Mei Changsu's lips parted. He emitted a very quiet but very stern phrase:

“Listen, tell those two to go back!”

Chapter 13 (Modified Version)

While Mei Changsu and Princess Nihuang were having a tête-à-tête on the Phoenix Building, the young people within the tent were feeling rather uneasy. They surrounded Mei Changsu as soon as he returned.

“What did the Princess say to you?” asked Yan Yujin, who rushed to the front with curiosity.

Mei Changsu smiled meaningfully. He blinked and answered, “The Princess praised me. She said I looked like a qilin...”

“Qilin?” Yan Yujin was startled. “Is it that odd looking sacred beast? Are you sure the Princess was praising you?”

“What’re you saying?” Xie Bi gave him a shove. “That’s the Princess praising him for being a qilin prodigy!”

Mei Changsu gave him a side-long look, but remained silent. Xie Bi finally realized that he said something wrong and coloured. However, Yan Yujin did not question further, and instead happily chattered to Mei Changsu about how amusing the recent fights were. Xiao Jingrui, whose expression wavered, pretended not to hear. He turned to instruct servants outside the tent to bring in some hot tea.

A new understanding washed over Mei Changsu. One of them was carefree and honest, the other was pure and kind. Yet, they were both more sensitive than Xie Bi, who was entangled in the schemes of politics. At least they knew when to ignore certain things.

But since Xie Bi knew about the “qilin prodigy” comment, his status with Prince Yu was clearly significant. Whether it’s a Crown Prince or a Prince, they will surely invoke the Emperor’s apprehension and anger if His Majesty hears about them recruiting some qilin. Thus, they would never tell this secret to anyone

besides their closest confidants. Mei Changsu was still unable to deduce how Princess Nihuang came upon this news.

“...and then he dodged and dodged. At first, his opponent couldn’t do anything about it, but he forgot that he was on a stage. So, just as he was happily dodging, he stepped into thin air and fell down! Hahaha...” Yan Yujin roared with laughter. Suddenly, he stiffened his face and asked angrily, “Su, are you listening to me?”

“I am.”

“Isn’t it funny?”

“It is very funny.”

“But you’re not laughing!”

“I am laughing...”

Xiao Jingrui came over and punched Yan Yujin. “Su has dignity, and he laughs in a refined manner. You think everyone laughs their head off like you?”

Yan Yujin was just about to retort, but Xi Bi suddenly gave a cough. He said quietly, “The Crown Prince and Prince Yu are coming this way.”

The tent was immediately silent. Mei Changsu stood up slowly and called out, “Feiliu, the people coming here are guests. Don’t block them.”

A grumbled “Oh” sounded from outside, and a loud voice announced, “The Crown Prince has arrived! Prince Yu has arrived!”

One can tell at a glance that the two people walking in were brothers. They were both tall and well-built, with deep-set eyes and thin lips. The Crown Prince, Xiao Jingxuan, was thirty-five years old. He had two deep wrinkles by his mouth and a slightly nefarious air. Prince Yu, Xiao Jinghuan, was thirty-two. His features were more relaxed, and he wore a peaceful smile as he

walked in.

Everyone in the tent bowed down in greeting, and were of course immediately supported upright.

“Jingrui and Yujin, you two went for a long trip again didn’t you? You make me so envious.” Prince Yu had once been in charge of these noble young men while they were studying in the Royal Schoolhouse. Compared to the Crown Prince, he had a closer relationship with the people present. He smiled and patted Xiao Jingrui’s shoulder, “I’ve heard awhile back that you three brought an honoured guest into the capital. Unfortunately, I have been swamped with work and wasn’t able to pay a visit.”

The Crown Prince made a slight face. Couldn’t find the time? If the two weren’t restrained by each other’s watchful eyes, Prince Yu would’ve immediately rushed over as soon as he heard the news from Xie Bi. Even so, didn’t he ask the Empress to go on a recruitment visit the very next day? Word says that he was deftly rejected. Serves him right!

“This must be Mr. Su. You live up to your elegant fame,” continued Prince Yu pleasantly. “The fourteen prefectures of East River have enjoyed years of peace and prosperity thanks to the efforts of your honoured alliance. I have been meaning to report this to the Emperor to request commendation for your alliance. I did not dare to act only in fear that your alliance may disdain material prizes with its virtuous spirit.”

Mei Changsu replied evenly, “My name is Su Zhe. I came to the capital with friends, and have nothing to do with the East River Alliance. Please do not misunderstand, Prince Yu.”

The Crown Prince was overjoyed seeing Prince Yu rendered speechless by the polite retort. He jumped on the opportunity and said, “That’s absolutely right. Mr. Su is just Mr. Su, why are you dragging in other things? I have heard that you suffer from poor health, and came to the capital for relaxation and amusement.

What sights have you seen?”

“Ah, I gave Su a tour around the capital for a whole day. Qing Music House, Shangxu Market, Fuzi Temple, Xiyuan Pond... We’ve been to them all!” answered Yan Yujin innocently.

“These are all places you like to visit.” The Crown Prince glared at Yan Yujin accusingly, “Mr. Su has sophisticated tastes. How would he be able to enjoy these noisy and artless places? The scenic places of Jinling are mostly located at the outskirts of the city. Unfortunately, most have been absorbed by the Royal Gardens. If Mr. Su is interested, then please accept this jade access token. It is not very useful, but it will aid in clearing your path.”

His speech was modest, but everyone knew the importance of the stamped jade token he brought out. Xie Bi raised his eyebrows and glanced at Prince Yu.

The temporarily defeated Prince Yu pursed his lips and waited for Mei Changsu’s reactions. The Chief of the East River Alliance took the token casually and gave it a glance. A slight smile appeared on his lips, and he called out, “Feiliu!”

In the blink of an eye, the handsome and frigid youth appeared by Mei Changsu’s side. The young gentlemen were used to it, but the two Princes were given quite a fright.

“Here, take this. In the future, you can move however you want when you go out to play. If an uncle catches you again, then show this token to him. Okay?”

“Okay!”

“All right, go play then.”

Chapter 14 (Modified Version)

The youth vanished before everyone's eyes. The Crown Prince stood dumbstruck, his face a shade darker. On the other hand, Prince Yu was getting cramps from suppressing his laughter.

The jade token was stamped with the Emperor's Royal Seal. Besides the Crown Prince, it was not bestowed to even the other Princes. It was absolutely a symbol of status. The token would humble all officials wherever the bearer goes, and yet he casually handed such a generous gift for his guard to play with. Should one say that he was blind to its value, or that he was simply rude?

"Actually, sightseeing is really taxing on the body." It was Prince Yu's turn again to pull himself together. "Mr. Su should first nurse his health. By chance, I recently received a rare thousand-year knotweed¹, which is a great supplement. Also, I have a medical spring² at the Mt. Ling palace. Bathing in this spring is very invigorating, even Father constantly praises its effects. Why don't I invite Mr. Su to go there for a short stay? I will be able to have a chance to discuss literature and prose with you. I am hoping to absorb some of the elegance and grace of the top rank gentleman."

Even Xiao Jingrui was moved by Prince Yu's suggestion. The thought back to their journey, where Mei Changsu's colour drained and breath shortened with any light exertion. He often coughed for half the night as well. The thousand-year knotweed and the Mt. Lin medical spring were undoubtedly offerings difficult to refuse.

"Aren't you really busy recently? I believe Father gave you a handful of tasks, saying you were very capable." The Crown Prince sneered, "How would you have time to accompany Mr. Su to some Mt. Lin palace?"

"You don't need to worry, brother. I've completed my tasks regarding the Department of Military Affairs and Qi Prefecture. I

reported to Father yesterday, and was just about to report to you today. As for the case against Duke Qing, the Royal Commissioner has yet to return, so the trial cannot begin for now. There's a perfect opportunity of some idle days right now. Shouldn't you let your brother rest for a little while?" responded Prince Yu, smiling. His attitude was extremely respectful, but the Crown Prince felt great resentment. It looked to him that Prince Yu was simply itching for a beating. He wished that nobody was present so he could give him a few refreshing slaps himself.

"I will gratefully accept your kind intentions," said Mei Changsu. He took a look at these brothers. They had the appearance of perfect respect, yet both hated each other to the core. He bowed slowly in respect and continued, "However, I have been taking medicine especially prepared for me by Dr. Xun. I cannot take unapproved supplements. The thousand-year knotweed is such a treasure, please do not waste it. As for the medical spring at Mt. Lin, I'm afraid I will need to write to Dr. Xun first. If he says that I may bathe in it, then I will go disturb Your Highness."

The Crown Prince felt much better after seeing Mei Changsu refuse Prince Yu as well. He quickly cut in, "That's right. One can never be too careful in nursing an illness. There's no logic in gulping down any expensive medicine you find and jumping in any water you see. If you do not have any doctor better than Dr. Xun, then stop giving random suggestions to Mr. Su."

Prince Yu understood that Mei Changsu would never express which party he prefers in front of the Crown Prince and himself. This meeting was simply an opportunity for everyone to be acquainted and observe each other in close quarters. The real battle will take place later. He shouldn't rush things. Thus, he laughed with the perfect picture of benevolence and said, "That was careless of me. It's a pity that there is no wine here, or I would certainly drink three cups in penance."

The Crown Prince stood up. "Jinghuan, Mr. Su came here today

to watch the tournament. Let's not bother him any further. Shall we leave now?"

Prince Yu pondered for a moment. Although the jade token from the Crown Prince was handed off to his guard, the gift was ultimately accepted. How could he allow himself to fall behind? He quickly gave Xie Bi a look.

"That's right, Su," called out Xie Bi with immediate understanding. "Didn't you want to pay tribute to the remnants of Mr. Li Cong's teachings? I believe that he had some manuscripts..."

"Yes yes, they're at my manor." Prince Yu continued the conversation immediately. "I hold great respect for the great Confucian scholar Mr. Li, and thus collected a few of his manuscripts. Could it be that Mr. Su is also...?"

"Mr. Li had students from all walks of life. Su had also listened to his lectures," contributed Xie Bi.

"What a coincidence." Prince Yu clapped with a smile. "We would have a lot to discuss in the future."

This really lined up with Mei Changsu's tastes. His eyes sparkled, and he asked quietly, "Which manuscripts? Is there Absolute Discourse?"

"Yes, yes," replied Prince Yu with joy. "It's right in my library. If Mr. Su wishes to read it, please come to my manor whenever you wish to. Nobody would dare to block your path."

He did not mention gifting the manuscript, instead only inviting Mei Changsu to his manor read it. Clearly, he wanted to use the manuscript as bait to create frequent interactions between them. The Crown Prince did not like where this was going, and was growing uneasy. He interjected hastily, "Jinghuan, aren't you being too petty? It's just a few manuscripts. If Mr. Su likes them, then just gift them to him. Don't create such a hassle for him by

making him view them at your manor... If you're feeling too stingy, then name a price. I'll buy them as a gift to Mr. Su."

After receiving such provocation, Prince Yu had no choice but to say, "I was only afraid that Mr. Su would not accept the manuscripts. If you are willing to receive them, I will of course immediately deliver them."

Mei Changsu replied lightly, "Since Prince Yu cherishes these manuscripts as well, I would not dare to snatch them away."

"Oh, what are you saying? You are such a talented and knowledgeable individual. If Mr. Li was still alive today, he would definitely see you as his top pupil. These manuscripts should naturally be in your hands." Prince Yu put on a benevolent façade. He couldn't resist shooting an attack towards the Crown Prince, and said to him, "At the risk of offending you, my brother, I must say that there's a problem with what you've just said. These manuscripts aren't worth much in the eyes of an average person, but they are priceless treasures in the eyes of those who hold respect for Mr. Li. So, I'm afraid that you may upset Mr. Su with talk like naming a price..."

The Crown Prince was immediately upset. However, it was true that he did not enjoy reading and couldn't understand the thoughts of these scholars. He was afraid of saying something wrong and offending Mei Changsu, and was forced to endure the attack.

There was no significant victory or defeat in the two's skirmish. They saw Mei Changsu's fatigue and knew that they couldn't stay long. Each said some more words of concern out of courtesy, and the two left together.

Notes:

[1\]](#) A [traditional Chinese herbal medicine](#).

[2\]](#) Think hot springs, but filled with herbal medicine.

Chapter 15: Tingsheng

Yan Yujin had long since gotten tired of the snide attacks within the tent and had run out alone to watch the tournament. He only returned after seeing the two Princes leave, and saw Mei Changsu coughing nonstop on the chair, with Xiao Jingrui patting his back gently. Yan Yujin asked immediately, “What’s wrong, Su? Are you sick again?”

“It’s nothing much...” Mei Changsu accepted the tea Xiao Jingrui handed him and took a drink. He wiped the corner of his eyes which had teared up from coughing. “The Crown Prince and Prince Yu both had some fragrance... I’m not used to it...”

“Oh, I know, that’s ambergris from the East Sea. It was gifted to them by the Emperor, and only to those two. The fragrance is strong indeed, it’s no wonder that Su is not used to it. But, I’ve heard that it’s the best in keeping one spirited. It’s even said to increase the masculine energy.”

“Is that so...” answered Mei Changsu off-handedly. He glanced at Xie Bi, who was standing at the side and didn’t appear to have heard their conversation.

His dislike for ambergris should reach Prince Yu through Xie Bi by tonight, so Prince Yu will not be wearing the fragrance the next time he meets Mei Changsu. Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin were definitely not the Crown Prince’s men, so there shouldn’t be anyone to give this information to him. Yet, if the Crown Prince also abandons the fragrance during their next meeting, then it would mean that the Crown Prince has spies in Prince Yu’s manor.

If the Crown Prince does not receive the news and continues to wear ambergris before him, then the abilities and control of Prince Yu need to be re-evaluated with a big increase in his favour...

It was finally quiet after the exit of the two Princes. No more outstanding visitors arrived, and the group was able to watch a few

rounds of the competition peacefully. There were no exceptional fighters, but the matches were still rather entertaining.

There was a two-hour break at noon. Curtains shimmered atop the Phoenix Building, and one couldn't tell if the Emperor was still present. He probably only arrived to show his presence. It was unlikely that he would watch the competition in its entirety for days on end. Yan Yujin arranged for food and drinks at some point. He began to excitedly discuss the events of the morning while waiting for the afternoon competition to begin. Yan Yujin was probably the only one among them all to put all his heart and mind into watching the competition.

At a little bit past noon, Xie Bi disappeared with some excuse. Xiao Jingrui saw the sluggish Mei Changsu and suggested to return home early. Yan Yujin was unable to retain them and could only bid them farewell. His lonely figured saw his friends off by the tent entrance.

As soon as he was in the carriage, Mei Changsu leaned on the pillows and closed his eyes for a snooze. Xiao Jingrui did not disturb him. He sat quietly by Mei Changsu's side, looking as if he had something on his mind. The carriage shook slowly, and their shoulders brushed every so often. The mood was very tranquil, but also a little stagnant.

After some time had passed, Mei Changsu asked, "When we were just coming out... Jingrui, did you see?"

Xiao Jingrui's heart throbbed. His fingers unconsciously pulled on the curtain's tassels. After a long pause, he finally replied with a "Yeah".

"After seeing that...what do you feel?" Mei Changsu opened his eyes and slowly rested his gaze upon his companion. The latter was turning his gaze as well. His bright eyes showed a hint of something bitter, yet sweet. They looked as if some uncertainty lingered one moment, but then they appeared to be very clear in

the next.

“My first thought was...her hairstyle changed. The hair she wore down before... They’re all coiled up now¹. It looks nice. Nicer than before...” Xiao Jingrui squinted his eyes slightly, as if recalling. He continued, “And then I saw the person beside her. They were holding hands... Honestly speaking, I still felt a tiny bit upset at first, but then I felt completely at peace. It was a beautiful scene—she tilting her head to speak and he listening quietly. I didn’t feel uncomfortable at all. Especially the way he looked at her with those eyes... It makes me feel that it was worth all the waiting Ms. Yun did for him. I don’t think I would be able to have such an expression in my eyes, even when my love for her was at its peak... Su, I don’t know why, I just know that I wouldn’t be able to as I am right now. I feel like I’m still lacking somewhere, but I can’t figure it out...”

“Because the people who have walked on the ridge between life and death are those returning from another world. The people who have only lived in one world can never be like them...” Mei Changsu looked at Xiao Jingrui deeply. His eyes were filled with kindness while he spoke, “But why be like them? Isn’t it better to live happily in the simple world?”

Xiao Jingrui raised his eyebrows. “Su, you think that...Ms. Yun’s husband had experienced...”

“The walk near death make love shine brighter.” Mei Changsu sighed. “Regardless of what they’ve experienced, it is reassuring for such infatuation to have a good ending.”

“That’s true,” nodded Xiao Jingrui solemnly. “Such a kind and benevolent person like Ms. Yun deserves a happy ending of a loving husband and blissful life.”

Mei Changsu turned his face slightly and hid the light flickering in the depth of his eyes. He spoke to himself in the quietest voice, “Such a pure and kind person like you should deserve a happy

ending as well...”

“What did you say, Su?” Xiao Jingrui leaned in to listen but still couldn’t hear him clearly.

“I said... Such a good person like you will definitely meet the right lady in the future...”

“The future...” Xiao Jingrui sighed. He was lost in thought for awhile. Then, he lifted a curtain and looked out.

He simply wanted to look around, but as soon as he stuck his head out, he saw a crowd of people around the corner. A horse carriage was stopped in the middle, where there was loud cursing.

“Jingrui, stop the carriage and see what’s going on.” Mei Changsu sat up to look outside as well. “I heard the voice of a child.”

“Okay,” answered Xiao Jingrui. He ordered the carriage to stop, then jumped down and walked closer to the scene. The group of people were wearing the same servant uniforms. A lantern with the surname “He” hung from the carriage. The people on the street did not dare to get close and watched the scene from a great distance.

Xiao Jingrui frowned, and roughly figured out the identity of the person flaunting his power in the streets. He squeezed into the centre. Sure enough, he saw He Wenxin, the son of the Minister of Personnel He Jingzhong. He Wenxin was kicking a small, thin boy. He yelled while kicking, “You little bastard, what were you scampering about for? You startled my horse and almost made me fall from it...” He snatched the horse whip from a servant nearby. He was just about to put his strength into it when his hand was caught by someone.

“Who the fuck dares to—” He Wenxin began to swear angrily, then saw Xiao Jingrui’s face. He quickly swallowed back the rest of his words. Actually, the real nobles within the capital are generally

well disciplined. Very few would act so cruelly in the streets like this. Even though there were some people who hold true disdain for commoners, they would refrain from beating and swearing in person out of concern for their status. He Wenxin's father became a court official through Royal Examinations, and was transferred all around the empire after his appointment. He Wenxin was left under the care of his grandmother, who spoiled him and neglected in his discipline. He was notorious for his atrocity from just the few years he's been in the capital. He did possess some cleverness and usually never messed with those he cannot afford to mess with. Thanks to that, he has lasted until now without incidences. He did not dare to speak more when he saw that it was Xiao Jingrui interjecting. "Never mind, I don't want to bother with this," he said with some embarrassment, and disappeared rapidly with his servants.

Even though Xiao Jingrui was angry, it was not as if he could drag He Wenxin back and give him a beating. So, he resigned with a sigh and crouched down to look at the child. The boy was tiny and thin, appearing to be no older than ten. On his face were a few slightly swollen red handprints. When the boy saw the man beating him leave, he straightened his curled up body a bit and quickly crawled around to pick up some scattered books. He stacked them into a large pile and wrapped them with an old cloth. However, there were many books and little cloth, and he couldn't make a knot.

"What's your name?" asked Xiao Jingrui as he helped to gather a few books. He touched the boy's shoulder, "You probably received quite a few kicks. Are you hurt?"

The boy cowered away from his hand. He lowered his head and remained silent.

"Jingrui," called Mei Changsu from the carriage, "Bring the child here and let me have a look."

"Okay." Xiao Jingrui reached out to grab the boy's arm. He spoke

warmly, “How would you be able to carry this many books? I’ll find someone to help you. Come, let’s go there first.”

“I can carry them...” mumbled the boy quietly. In the end, he did not dare to struggle much. Xiao Jingrui half-dragged, half-carried the boy to the carriage and stuffed him inside.

Mei Changsu’s pressed on the boy’s shoulder with his warm and soft hands. He moved down steadily, checking his whole body gently and attentively. When his palm pressed on the lower ribs, the boy cried out in pain and skirted back.

“He is probably hurt here.” Xiao Jingrui stopped the boy from behind and removed his shirt gently. He sucked in his breath. Besides a new purple bruise at his ribs, old wounds appeared all over his thin body. At a rough glance, there appeared to be wounds from clubs, whips, and even branding irons. The marks were fading, but one could imagine what type of torment the child went through.

“Which family are you from?” asked Xiao Jingrui loudly, unable to contain his shock. On a second thought, he asked again, “Are you a servant of some manor? Who’s the one constantly beating you like this...”

“No...” denied the child immediately. “I haven’t been beaten for many years. This is from before...”

“Even if it’s from before. Tell me, who beat you?”

“Jingrui.” Mei Changsu stopped him quietly, “Don’t question him further. This child’s ribs must be fractured if not broken. Let’s bring him back to the manor first and have a doctor take a look at him. Also, bring those books in. Look, this child is really concerned about his books...”

He was not wrong. The boy looked clearly relieved once he saw all the books brought in. He begged quietly, “I’m fine, please let me down. I can go back by myself...”

“Where are you going back to?” Xiao Jingrui took this opportunity and inquired further.

The boy seemed very sharp. He immediately lowered his head.

“Are you reading all of these books?” asked Mei Changsu warmly, flipping through the pile of books. Perhaps his air of gentle elegance was reassuring. The boy was a little calmer after he raised his head and glanced at Mei Changsu. He answered meekly, “Yes, some... Some others...I can’t understand.”

“How old are you?”

“Eleven.”

“What’s your name?”

The boy paused for a long time, so long that it seemed like he wouldn’t answer. Finally, he said woodenly, “Tingsheng.”

“What is your surname?”

“...I don’t have a surname. I am just called Tingsheng...”

Mei Changsu re-examined this child closely. His face was swollen red and his features have yet to mature, but one can still see that he had rather handsome eyes. His words and actions have been very submissive since the beginning, without any apparent struggle against unjust treatment. Yet strangely enough, one could not feel a hint of servitude from him. It was as if he radiated tenacity from his bones, and nobody can make him subservient regardless of how he is bullied.

“Tingsheng, if we let you down now, would someone find a doctor for you when you go back?”

Tingsheng pressed his lips together. Clearly, there was no certain answer, and he did not wish to lie.

“Then we must take you back to our place and have a doctor take a look at you. After he says that you’re okay, we’ll send you back. Does that sound good?”

Tingsheng hung his head and kept silent, his brows squeezed together.

“Will our goodwill bring you difficulties?”

Tingsheng flinched and bit his lips together tightly.

“Did you come out by yourself?”

“No... There’s another person...”

“Where is he?”

“He ran off...”

“If you go home late, will someone beat you?”

A chill flashed in Tingsheng’s eyes. He shook his head, “Not anymore... I just won’t get food...”

Xiao Jingrui felt his blood surge. He said angrily, “You don’t get food? Which family do you belong to? Why would you go back after being treated like this? Tell me, I can help you. You can come to my family too. At least we’ll feed you!”

Tingsheng raised his eyes. In his gaze was a sense of calm and maturity beyond his years. “You’re taking pity on me and want to take me in, right?”

Xiao Jingrui froze. He tried to explain awkwardly, “No... What I meant was...”

“I don’t have the right to be taken in. I must go back to that place... If I could be taken in, I would’ve been ages ago...”

“Do you have a contract?” guessed Xiao Jingrui. “Who is the owner? Tell me, I can go negotiate.”

Tingsheng lowered his eyes with indifference. “No, you can’t.”

“Do you know who he is?” asked Mei Changsu. He looked into the child’s eyes. “His father is a Marquess and his mother is a Princess. He is a person of high status. Regardless of who you were sold to in Jinling, your old master will let him have his way as long

as he goes forward to negotiate. Do you understand?”

Tingsheng’s head remained lowered. He insisted, “No, you can’t.”

Mei Changsu and Xiao Jingrui looked at each other. They were just about to speak again when the driver called out, “Young master, we’ve reached the manor.”

Notes:

[1\]](#) Unmarried girls tend to wear their hair down, and married women tend to coil their hair up.

Chapter 16: Prince Jing

“Here, let’s head in first.” Xiao Jingrui jumped down from the carriage and lifted the child down as well. He instructed the servant who came up to greet them, “Go summon a doctor.”

Mei Changsu followed them, stooping out from the carriage. He carried the heavy bag of books, wondering how the little child managed to lift it.

“I’ll hold it,” said Xiao Jingrui, walking over. However, an attentive servant had already seized the bag. He reached out his arm instead and supported Mei Changsu as he jumped down from the carriage.

Tingsheng took a quick glimpse at the “Manor of the Marquess of Ning” sign above the entrance, and his face clouded for a second. Even though he quickly lowered his head again, this slight change in demeanor did not escape Mei Changsu’s eyes.

They brought the child to the Snow Cottage. A doctor soon arrived to treat him, and concluded that his ribs were dislocated. He must rest, eat nutritious food, and must refrain from any more physical labour. If not, then this will inevitably cause other issues for his body in the future.

One could tell that Tingsheng lived in very harsh conditions just by looking at him. If they let him return now, then he probably will not be able to fulfill any one of the doctor’s orders. Yet, regardless of how Xiao Jingrui interrogated him, Tingsheng refused to spill out any details on where he lived.

Compared to him, Mei Changsu was much more patient. He sent for someone to bring exquisite food and drinks to feed Tingsheng, then told him to sleep and rest. When he saw that Tingsheng was much too uneasy to fall asleep, he began to flip through a book to examine the extent of the boy’s knowledge.

“You don’t have a teacher, do you?”

“No.”

“Who taught you to read?”

“My mom.”

Mei Changsu pondered for a moment. Although this child had a desire to learn, his education was clearly shallow and chaotic. The books he bought were haphazard as well, varying in their difficulty. They did not seem to be a list given to him by a scholar, but rather more like what he chose himself based on his own presumptions. Mei Changsu wondered where he got the money to buy books.

“Tingsheng, education doesn’t work like that.” Mei Changsu organized his pile of books patiently. He went to retrieve many more volumes from his room and marked them in order. “You need to read these books first. These are the fundamentals. They are the simplest in content and style, and have clear moral values. Learning is just like building a house—the foundation needs to be solid so that the house above will not be crooked. If you just read at random without understanding their true meaning, you will only mess up your temperament. And these books, they are good books, but you are too young. I doubt you can even recognize all these words, so you wouldn’t understand their contents without someone to explain them to you. Leave these books for now. If you have a chance in the future, then feel free to come and ask me.”

Tingsheng’s eyes lit up, but immediately dimmed again. He intuitively knew that this older brother before him was a learned scholar. However, it was absolutely impossible to frequent this Marquess manor and ask him questions.

“Thank you.” Tingsheng stood up and bowed deeply to the two. “Can I leave now?”

“Geez, you...” Xiao Jingrui looked at him, his head beginning to

throb. “You already had a huge pile of books, and now Mr. Su gave you so many more. How can you carry them all?”

Tingsheng looked at the small mountain of books and really did not wish to abandon any. So, he gritted his teeth and said bravely, “I can carry them.”

“Don’t be rash now.” Xiao Jingrui caught him quickly. “You’re hurt. You can’t use brute strength like that. Why don’t I ask someone to send you back?”

Tingsheng shook his head with determination.

Xiao Jingrui was powerless with this child. He looked helplessly towards Mei Changsu.

Mei Changsu pondered for a moment. He was just about to speak when a clear shout sounded from outside the Snow Cottage. It was Feiliu’s voice, followed immediately by someone calling, “Little master, you can’t hit him... He is...”

“Breaking in. Hit!” answered Feiliu coldly. The sound of cloths snapping in the air grew louder.

“Who are you? How dare you obstruct my...” shouted another person angrily, and the voice cut off. He was probably unable to speak further due to Feiliu’s attacks.

“Go out, then no hit!” Feiliu likely received instructions from Mei Changsu and was not lethal in his attacks. However, his voice was like ice, leaving no room for discussion.

Xiao Jingrui was unable to identify the voice of the man being obstructed, but he still ran out immediately. Moments later, his voice sounded as well, “Feiliu, stop fighting. This is a guest. He can come in.”

“Didn’t say okay! Out!” insisted Feiliu.

Mei Changsu frowned. Besides the few people Feiliu already knew, most guests would be announced by servants. If he wished

to see them, then he would first instruct Feiliu to allow them in. This had allowed them to be free from conflicts thus far. This guest had clearly charged in by relying on some kind of status, and not only were the servants afraid to block his way, they did not even have a chance to announce him first. Thus, he ended up provoking Feiliu and was stopped by him.

Normally, Mei Changsu would never see such a rude guest.

He was just about to raise his voice and decline this guest when his gaze fell upon Tingsheng.

The child's face was as white as a sheet. He stared straight forward, mouth agape, and was listening attentively to the noise outside. He wrung his hands together, almost changing their shape.

Mei Changsu suddenly changed his mind. He called out, "Feiliu, let him in!"

The sound of combat immediately stopped, and Xiao Jingrui's voice sounded again. His tone was extremely polite, saying, "I hope you are unhurt? What could have made you charge in like this? Is there an urgent matter? My father is not home right now. Why don't I accompany you to the main hall and wait..."

"I'm not looking for the Marquess," said the man as he charged into the Snow Cottage. His path led him before Mei Changsu, whose calm gaze had a hint of sharpness. The man stopped involuntarily. He swept the room with his eyes, and finally calmed down when he saw Tingsheng standing there safe and sound. He asked, "Ting, are you all right?"

"Yes," answered Tingsheng, his voice low and respectful.

"Do you know this child?" asked Xiao Jingrui, who followed the man in.

"Jingrui." The man turned and spoke solemnly, "I heard that this child accidentally bumped into the carriage of a nobleman,

and perhaps he startled your important guest. It's no wonder that you're upset. However, he is just a child. Please do me a favour. Can you allow him to apologize to your guest and let him go?"

Xiao Jingrui looked at him, his mind whirling. He stood confused until Mei Changsu let out a laugh, then he followed suit. "I think Your Highness has some misunderstandings. Tingsheng did not bump into my carriage. We met him passing by and decided to bring him home with us to treat his wounds. If you don't believe me, you can ask Tingsheng."

The man stood dazed. He turned to glance at Tingsheng's expression, thought about Xiao Jingrui's usual conduct, and knew that he spoke the truth. He immediately looked embarrassed.

"I did not know that it was Prince Jing arriving." Mei Changsu stood up slowly and bowed. "Please forgive Feiliu's offense just now."

Xiao Jingrui hurried forward and introduced, "Prince Jing, this is Mr. Su Zhe."

The Emperor's seventh son Xiao Jingyan was thirty-one years old, a tall and slender young man. His features were not too different from his brothers, but due to leading the army year-round, he had an extra dash of fortitude in addition to the imperious air of royalty. The skin on his face and hands were also not as delicately preserved as the other Princes. He did not show any unusual expression upon hearing the name of Su Zhe, and returned a bow politely, likely only due to Xiao Jingrui's ceremonial introduction.

On the other hand, Mei Changsu examined Prince Jing carefully behind his usual expression of calmness.

Xiao Jingrui asked as soon as the guest was seated, "Does Tingsheng belong to Your Highness?"

"...Erm... No..." Prince Jing had a troubled expression, as if he

did not know how to answer. “Tingsheng currently...lives in the Secluded Courtyard...”

“The Secluded Courtyard?” Xiao Jingrui did not think of that place. He blurted out, “Isn’t that the place of punishment for the Palace’s servants? He’s so young, what crime could he have committed to be confined there?”

Tingsheng’s lips were pressed into a line, stiff as steel. He did not have any colour on his face.

“He was confined with his mother, and was born there.¹” Prince Jing knew that even if he did not speak, Xiao Jingrui would be able to investigate easily. So, he spoke quickly and frankly. “If you don’t need anything else, then please let him go back soon. According to regulations, the people in the Secluded Courtyard are not allowed to spend the night outside. His mother is probably very worried right now...”

“You know his mother?” Xiao Jingrui knew that he should not inquire further, but was not able to win against his curiosity. Prince Jing’s official consort had passed away many years ago. Currently, he only has two concubines who were appointed to him, and no others. Compared to other Princes with teeming harems, he was certainly eccentric. Perhaps it was because he fell in love with a convicted Palace maid. Thinking further along those lines, perhaps that child was...

At this point, Xiao Jingrui felt that his imagination was in danger of turning into that of Yan Yujin. He forcefully cut off his train of thought and smiled with some embarrassment.

Prince Jing was his elder by a few years and thus had more life experience. He was also pretty smart, and so he understood from a glance where Xiao Jingrui’s thoughts ran off to. However, he did not intend on clarifying. He learned about Tingsheng’s existence only a few years ago. At the time, the child was tormented beyond belief. For the past few years, he had exercised some of his powers

to relieve Tingsheng from beatings, but at the end of the day, he could not protect him perfectly. Prince Jing would inevitably be worried whenever he left the capital to inspect the borders. He returned to the capital just a few days ago and was busy completing some tasks from the Department of Military Affairs. He finally had some free time to check on Tingsheng in the Secluded Courtyard, but heard his friend say that he got into trouble in the streets. Prince Jing quickly looked into the situation and rushed over to save him. Thankfully, nothing major happened.

“It was impertinent of me to trespass into the Marquess’s manor. I will most certainly return with apologies on another day.” Prince Ying did not say much more. He stood up and gave Tingsheng a look. “It is getting late. I will take my leave—”

Before he finished, Mei Changsu suddenly began to cough. At first, it seemed like he was forcefully suppressing it. Then, he began to cough more and more violently, as if he’s about to tear his organs apart. Veins popped all over his forehead, which was covered in large drops of sweat. Xiao Jingrui had never seen him cough like that in all their time together, and was very anxious. He hurried over to pat Mei Changsu’s back, but found it useless. He went to wipe his sweat with a handkerchief, but found his forehead to be burning hot while his face was icy cold. He became more agitated and shouted for someone to summon a doctor. Even Feiliu had pounced over. He hugged Mei Changsu’s shaking body, and was speechless like a terrified child who was only able to cry out “ah, ah”.

After a long struggle, Mei Changsu began to slowly calm down. He raised the handkerchief covering his mouth. A blot of glaring red blood flashed, and was crumpled away. Xiao Jingrui had already seen it and was very distressed, but kept quiet. He simply asked Mei Changsu softly, “Su, do you need to take one of Dr. Xun’s pills?”

“No need.” Mei Changsu fought to regulate his breathing and

smiled at Feiliu. “It is just a cough. Don’t be scared, Feiliu. I’ll be all right if Feiliu helps me and pat me on the back tonight...”

“Feiliu pat!”

“That’s right. With Feiliu patting my back, nothing would happen to me...”

Prince Jing had been watching from aside. He couldn’t leave, and couldn’t stay. He saw Su Zhe calm down now and hurried forward to inquire politely, “Is Mr. Su ill?”

Mei Changsu slowly turned his gaze, and found Tingsheng staring at him with wide eyes. Mei Changsu smiled softly at him and waved his hand, “Come here, Tingsheng.”

Tingsheng looked at Prince Jing. He didn’t really know what was going on, but he walked over to the long chair.

“Tingsheng, would you like me to be your teacher?”

Tingsheng was shocked. He did not know how to respond. Prince Jing frowned, “Mr. Su, Tingsheng is from the Secluded Courtyard...”

“I know.” Some moisture lingered in Mei Changsu’s eyes, probably due to his violent coughs. They made his gaze look more intense as he continued, “I am simply asking. Would you like me to?”

Tingsheng’s chest heaved sharply. For some reason, he was suddenly certain that this was an opportunity. So, he squared his jaws, straightened his back, and answered loudly, “Yes!”

“All right.” The smile on Mei Changsu’s pale face widened. He reached out and held the child’s hand in his. “Go back for now. I will definitely find a way to have you by my side.”

Notes:

1 Tingsheng’s name is literally “courtyard-born”, likely named after his birth in the Secluded Courtyard.

Chapter 17: Choosing A Master

As to Mei Changsu's sudden promise, the person who ended up being the most astounded was actually Prince Jing. Compared to Xiao Jingrui, he had a better understanding of the child's status, and he knew exactly how difficult it would be to take him away from the Secluded Courtyard. After all, even the significant efforts of a Prince could not achieve the goal of taking Tingsheng into his manor. This young man was simply a good friend of a Marquess's son. It would probably be futile even with Xiao Jingrui's assistance, and this would merely result in another disappointment for Tingsheng.

"Mr. Su must be a kind person and can't bear to see this child suffer," said Prince Jing evenly. "However, the people within the Secluded Courtyard may only leave with the Emperor's special pardon. It is not an easy task. Does Mr. Su think that it could be resolved with just a word from the Marquess of Ning?"

Xiao Jingrui said hurriedly, "Ah, I can ask Father to go meet the Emperor..."

"Jingrui." Prince Jing cut him off immediately. "Are you requesting the Marquess of Ning to meet the Emperor for the son of a maid in the Secluded Courtyard? Please stop making such jokes."

"But..." Xiao Jingrui was about to continue, but Mei Changsu pressed his arm and said, "Jingrui, Prince Jing is right. Every person in the Secluded Courtyard has criminal charges. It's not such a simple matter as taking pity on someone from the streets and buying them back. You must not say anything about this matter with the Marquess, nor to anyone else, understand?"

"You don't want us to help?" asked Xiao Jingrui incredulously. "Then how do you plan on rescuing him? Are you going to ask the Crown Prince and Prince Yu?"

Prince Jing raised his eyebrows. A light, sharp as a sword, flashed in his eyes. He said coldly, “So Mr. Su...is actually friends with the Crown Prince and Prince Yu. I have not paid you due respect!”

Mei Changsu glanced at him and ignored the comment. He continued his warm speech to Xiao Jingrui. “Jingrui, you must believe in me. I can be more confident about saving Tingsheng only if nobody else knows about this. As the son of a convicted maid, the Emperor’s suspicions will be raised in accordance with the status of the person asking for a special pardon. If not, Prince Jing could’ve saved him long ago. Promise me, pretend that you know nothing about this and do not bring it up again in the future, okay?”

Xiao Jingrui stared bewilderedly at him. Although he did not understand, he still nodded out of trust and respect for Su.

Right then, a person outside the courtyard announced, “Young master, the Marquess has returned.”

An idea struck Mei Changsu. He seized the chance and said, “Run along and go greet the Marquess. You don’t need to keep me company here.”

“But your body...”

“Don’t worry. You know that I cough a lot, it’s not a big deal. How can you not greet the Marquess when he returns to the manor? If you abandon the proper etiquette of a son in order to accompany me, the Marquess will think that I am a horrible friend you shouldn’t associate with. Go.”

Xiao Jingrui complied. He stood up and turned towards Prince Jing, “Then, I will accompany Your Highness out first.”

“Would Your Highness like to stay for a while longer? I have some details I want to ask...about Tingsheng...” said Mei Changsu, smiling.

Prince Jing’s eyes flickered. He couldn’t really figure out who

exactly this strange and sickly young man was, and wanted to observe him some more. So, he nodded to Xiao Jingrui and said, “You can go ahead. Since Mr. Su has such good intentions, I want to get to know him better as well.”

“If so, then I will take my leave.” Xiao Jingrui reckoned his father to have passed the second gate by now, and was a bit worried. He hurriedly gave a bow and rushed to the main courtyard.

After the owner left, the two remaining men in the courtyard did not begin to converse immediately. Prince Jing coldly surveyed the man sitting on the long chair beneath the tree, his expression extremely vigilant. On the other hand, Mei Changsu was a lot more relaxed. He quietly instructed Feiliu to go outside the courtyard, then picked out a book and sent Tingsheng to read it in another corner of the courtyard. Finally, he turned his gaze to the Prince and gave him a faint smile.

“Even if Your Highness holds animosity towards me, there’s really no need to express it so clearly,” said Mei Changsu leisurely. “At least you and I have a common goal right now, which is to save Tingsheng.”

“That is what I find curious,” responded Prince Jing, his eyes filled with suspicion. “Why are you putting in so much effort to rescue Tingsheng? Is it only due to sympathy?”

“Of course not.” Mei Changsu took a look at the tiny figure reading in the corner. His eyes were extremely warm. “He has great qualities. I want to take him in as a student.”

Prince Jing snorted. “There are many more children with better qualities than him. With your many friends—the son of the Marquess of Ning, the Crown Prince, and Prince Yu—you can take in any student you want.”

“Then what is the reason for Your Highness to protect Tingsheng so? Your Highness charged into the manor of the influential

Marquess of Ning for a little convicted servant. I'm guessing that it was not only due to sympathy?"

Prince Jing answered lightly, "I really like Tingsheng's mother. I am only caring for the loved one of the person I love..."

"You are caring for the loved one of the person you love indeed, but it is definitely not because of his mother..." Mei Changsu closed his eyes for a bit, and his face was an expressionless mask, "...but his father..."

Prince Jing's whole body trembled. The muscles on his face twitched involuntarily. His hands formed tight fists by his side, as if struggling to prevent them from colliding with the young man's face.

"I suppose this is the difference in age between Jingrui and I. I understood immediately, but he couldn't, because he was still a child at that time. He only knew to study literature and practise martial arts then. That event is too far in the past for him..." Mei Changsu was not looking at Prince Jing at all. A slightly bitter smile surfaced, and he continued, "Tingsheng is eleven, born in the Secluded Courtyard. Whose posthumous child is he? From the timing, the most fitting would be that person... You two were once deployed together, so you should've cared for each other a lot..."

Xiao Jingyan's gaze stabbed at Mei Changsu like icicles. His voice did not hold any warmth as he asked, "Who...are you?"

"Neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu is my friend. They are trying to recruit me." Mei Changsu laughed mockingly, "Do you know what comment Langya Hall has made for me? 'Qilin prodigy. Obtain him to obtain the world.' How could I be considered a qilin prodigy if I have no knowledge of the major events in the Princes' lives?"

"From what you've said, it sounds like you are deliberately collecting information and secrets of this sort to prepare for your future actions?"

“That’s right,” answered Mei Changsu quickly. “What’s wrong with being a qilin? I will be relied on by the powerful and make contributions to the world. Perhaps in the future, my name may enjoy a space of worship in the Royal Ancestral Temple, and my fame will go down in history.”

Prince Jing’s eyes were dark. He asked with a voice filled with hostility, “Then, are you planning on choosing the Crown Prince or Prince Yu?”

Mei Changsu lifted his head slightly. His eyes looked at the blue sky beyond the balding branches. He stared and stared. Finally, he slowly pulled his gaze back and set them upon Prince Jing. “I want to choose you, Prince Jing.”

“Choose me?” Prince Jing reared back and laughed, but his eyes were sorrowful. “Then you must be blind. My mother is a lowly Concubine, and I do not have any notable relatives on her side. I am thirty-one, and have yet to be decorated as a Royal Prince. I have always kept company solely with rugged military men, and have no contacts within the Royal Court. What can you accomplish by choosing me?”

“Certainly, your situation is not ideal,” said Mei Changsu evenly. “Unfortunately, I have no better choice.”

“What does that mean? The Crown Prince and Prince Yu both have considerable support. It wouldn’t be a surprise if either one snatches the throne...”

“I don’t want to choose them precisely because it wouldn’t be a surprise if either one obtains the throne. Would it not be a great show of my qilin abilities if I can set a person nobody thought of on the throne, all by myself?”

Prince Jing took a long look at Mei Changsu. He couldn’t tell if this person was joking or serious.

“Your Highness, please be honest.” Mei Changsu returned his

gaze calmly, like a demon luring someone to hell. “Are you really completely uninterested in becoming the Emperor?”

Xiao Jingyan’s heart quivered, and he silently clenched his jaw. As the Emperor’s son, it would be a lie to say that he had never held any desire for the throne. Yet, it would be untrue to say that he thinks about it constantly, or that seizing the throne is his most important goal in life. However, he was willing to pay any price if he could really prevent the Crown Prince and Prince Yu from claiming the throne.

“If I manage to save Tingsheng, then please consider it as a greeting gift for joining you.” Mei Changsu looked indifferent, but his words made Prince Jing’s blood churn. “The Eldest Prince, your most respected elder brother... Your wish is to have his only remaining blood leave the Secluded Courtyard, right?”

Prince Jing’s eyes quivered slightly. He spoke in staccato, “Can you really do it?”

“I can.”

“However... I do not actually appreciate people who are so calculating like you. Even if I were to ascend the throne with your assistance, you may not receive much merit or status from me. Are you fine with that?”

“Since I have a calculating mind, I will naturally have opportunities to discuss conditions with Your Highness.” Mei Changsu smiled broadly, making him appear sunny and lighthearted, much unlike his somber words. “You wouldn’t happen to be the type who kills accomplished officials, would you? That sounds more like Crown Prince and Prince Yu...”

Prince Jing began to think carefully with his fingers over his lips. This Su Zhe had said such ridiculous things, but he appeared to be very serious. Perhaps he was trying to deceive him, but he really couldn’t think of a motive. Whether it’s the Crown Prince or Prince Yu, neither had ever taken any brother besides each other

to be a worthwhile opponent. They wouldn't bother with sending such a capable person just to probe his thoughts. Then, what is he after? Is he really only choosing someone he wishes to support?

"Your Highness should think it over faster. After all, Tingsheng must return before dark," urged Mei Changsu serenely.

Finally, Prince Jing gritted his teeth and made a decision. "All right. As long as you can prevent the Crown Prince and Prince Yu from ascending the throne, I can cooperate with you."

"That's not enough determination. You must make the throne your absolute goal." Mei Changsu's words were like ice. "You know what powers the Crown Prince and Prince Yu hold. If you want them to fail, then someone else must succeed. Who can be this person be but you? Of the living Princes, the Third Prince is crippled, the Fifth Prince is cowardly, and the Ninth Prince is too young... Like I said, your situation is not ideal, but there is no other choice..."

"You're rather blunt." Prince Jing's eyes flashed with interest, "Since you're interested in joining me, aren't you afraid to offend me?"

"Do you only like to listen to pleasing words?" From his tone, Mei Changsu appeared very tired. He leaned back in his chair, his eyes half closed. "Please rest assured, Your Highness. In at most ten days after Princess Nihuang's tournament, I will be able to take Tingsheng away from the palace. Right now... Please forgive me for not seeing you off."

After he finished, he closed his eyes completely, as if beginning to nap. Xiao Jingyan did not pay much mind to such rude behaviour. He took a look at Mei Changsu, and did not say anything. Then, he stood up, called for Tingsheng, picked up the bag of books, and walked sharply out of the Snow Cottage.

Chapter 18: Old Friend

That night, Xiao Jingrui brought home a Royal Physician for Mei Changsu, but the doctor was afraid to interfere once he learned that the patient was taking medicine from Dr. Xun. He left orders to “rest well and avoid emotional stress”, then left immediately. Mei Changsu sent Xiao Jingrui off with the doctor, using the excuse of wanting to sleep early. He didn’t actually go to bed. Rather, he threw on a coat, opened the windows, and sat quietly beneath the windowsill. He stared at the crescent moon hanging in the sky, as if in deep thought.

Feiliu walked over. He sat on the little rug nearby, plopped his head onto Mei Changsu’s knee, and shook him gently.

Mei Changsu looked down on the black-haired head on his knee. He reached and patted it softly, asking quietly, “What’s wrong with our Feiliu? Feeling lonely?”

Feiliu raised his head and looked at Mei Changsu with eyes clear as daylight. “Don’t be sad!”

Mei Changsu was a bit taken aback. After a while, a warm smile appeared on his face. “I was only caught up in my thoughts. I’m not sad. Don’t worry, Feiliu.”

Feiliu shook his head and insisted, “Don’t be sad!”

That instant, Mei Changsu felt his whole heart melt, as if his emotions were about to burst from his control. Only a flickering breath remained in his chest, supporting his body’s movements and expressions. How easy it would be to not be sad! He only need to seek a secluded scenic location to recuperate, and have a few good friends visit frequently. There would be no intrigue, no conspiracies, and no betrayals. He would be able to recover from his lingering illness. He wouldn’t need to disappoint other’s good intentions. What a delight it would be for his body and soul! Unfortunately, that was ultimately a dream. The things he had

placed upon himself, he must grit his teeth and carry them to the end, regardless of how heavy and painful they were.

“Feiliu, why don’t you go back to Lang Prefecture?” suggested Mei Changsu quietly, caressing the youth’s head.

Feiliu’s eyes widened. He dived frantically and latched on to Mei Changsu’s waist. “Don’t want!”

“I can write a letter to Lin Chen and tell him to stop teasing you. Would that be okay?”

“Don’t want!”

“But Feiliu,” said Mei Changsu with a hint of insuppressible sorrow, “If you remain by my side, you will see me turn more and more evil. Eventually...Feiliu will be sad too...”

“Feiliu like this.” Feiliu pressed his face tightly against Mei Changsu’s knee. “Won’t be sad!”

“Is that enough?” Mei Changsu gave a long sigh. “Can you be very happy just by remaining at my side and resting upon my knee?”

“Feiliu happy!”

Mei Changsu gathered Feiliu’s face into his hands gently. He ran his fingers over Feiliu’s forehead, his expression growing more sorrowful. “All right... If that is the case, then at the very least, I should be able to preserve your happiness... Feiliu, you need to remember this. Regardless of what happens in the future, don’t be afraid, because there will always be someone taking care of you. You will always be my...happiest child...”

Feiliu blinked. He couldn’t really understand what was said, but he could feel its warmth and kindness. So, imitating Mei Changsu, he used his fingers to pull a slight smile on his icy face that was still unaccustomed to smiling. His forceful tugging made him look strange, but it was already a rare expression of his emotions.

“Our Feiliu is so cute. When we return to Lang Prefecture, let’s smile for Lin Chen too, okay?”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“He’s bad!”

“You really dislike Lin Chen, don’t you?” chuckled Mei Changsu soundlessly. He gathered Feiliu into his arms and rocked gently. “You’re better than me... It would be great if I can be so carefree... and so happy...”

Feiliu broke away from his arms. He sat up straight and spoke earnestly, “Can!”

Mei Changsu looked at him warmly, “Can I really?”

“Can!” repeated Feiliu. He rose and dragged a tall stool over. He sat on it, then pulled Mei Changsu to sit on the rug. He moved Mei Changsu’s head and placed it on his own knee. “Like Feiliu! Su can too!”

Mei Changsu felt his eyes moisten. He rested his head on Feiliu’s knee, and felt Feiliu’s fingers slipping into his hair and caressing him softly, caressing into him his purest love and reliance.

“Our Feiliu is so smart,” murmured Mei Changsu, shutting his eyes tightly. “So Su can be like this too...”

“Can!” Feiliu made a great effort and tried to smile again. At the same time, he rocked his knee and began to slowly hum a soothing tune.

“Feiliu has learned this song as well?”

“Learned! Feiliu sings!”

Mei Changsu took a deep breath and tried to relax every muscle in his body. Weariness washed over him.

“Sleep!” said Feiliu.

“Feiliu is sleepy and wants to sleep?”

“No! Su sleep! Feiliu fights bad guy!”

Mei Changsu froze, then quickly understood what Feiliu meant. He raised his eyebrows, “Someone came into the Snow Cottage?”

“Yup!” nodded Feiliu, “Outside! Uncle! Feiliu go fight him!”

Mei Changsu breathed a sigh of relief. He pulled on Feiliu’s arm and stood up, calling out the window, “Please come in, Meng.”

Just as his voice faded, a shadow flitted into the room. He clearly had a muscular physique, yet his movements were as quick as a spirit.

“This uncle is Su’s guest. Let’s not fight him, Feiliu. Let’s go sleep, okay?” Mei Changsu coaxed the youth into the inner chamber, Meng Zhi following behind him. The two adults waited until Feiliu laid down on his bed and closed his eyes obediently, then went to sit at the round table at the centre of the room.

“Did those two leave?” asked Mei Changsu as he poured a cup of tea for Meng Zhi.

“I delivered your message, but Wei Zheng looked like he didn’t want to leave...”

“Then what does he want to do?”

“Stay in the capital and help you, of course. He said that this is everyone’s business and that he can’t have you shouldering the burden yourself...”

“Nonsense!” responded Mei Changsu angrily. “He’s different from me. I’m all alone, but he has Ms. Yun. She had been waiting for him for the past twelve years, separated by life and death. She finally waited to see the day of him coming back after surviving, and the two are finally able to be together after enduring all that hardship. Why is he making a commotion again? I don’t need him here. He needs to leave if he wants to, and leave if he doesn’t!”

“You don’t need to get angry,” comforted Meng Zhi. “I know Wei Zheng. Regardless of how he feels, he will obey your orders. I am only worried about you right now. Did you come to the capital like this, unarmed and alone? Didn’t you bring any support?”

“But I brought Feiliu.”

“You mean that child?” Meng Zhi looked towards the bed. “Speaking of which, I’m really sorry about the other day. I didn’t know that this child was yours. I was shocked by his abilities, and fought him out of curiosity. I hope I didn’t cause you any trouble?”

“No,” said Mei Changsu lightly, “I only gained some fame.”

“Why didn’t you notify me first before coming here? How am I supposed to help you right now without any preparations?”

“Are you going to help me?” Mei Changsu smiled with indifference, “Forget about it. You are the Commander of the Royal Guards right now, and in high favour with the Emperor. Why should you endure hardships for me? You are helping me enormously just by pretending not to know me.”

Meng Zhi gritted his teeth and furrowed his brows in anger. “Did you really mean that? What kind of person do you take me for?”

Mei Changsu smiled, so faintly that it was barely noticeable. He grabbed Meng Zhi’s elbow and squeezed. He answered quietly, “Meng, how could I not know your feelings? Ignoring the fact that you were war buddies with us, you wouldn’t stand idly by just based on your chivalry alone. However, I really do not have an absolute chance of success in what I’m doing. I don’t want to drag you in. I fear that some small carelessness will destroy overnight the loyal name of Meng that has existed for generations...”

“Loyalty lies in the heart, not in the name. As long as you do not directly harm the Emperor, you will never be my enemy.”

“The Emperor? The Emperor is forever a knife, holding the power to kill and cut.” Mei Changsu smiled in understanding, “It

seems that you've already guessed my reason for entering the capital."

"Yes, I think I can guess it." Meng Zhi's eyes were filled with concern. "However, while it is simple to break the path of either the Crown Prince or Prince Yu, it will be hard to get rid of both of them. His Majesty will need to keep one no matter what!"

"Not necessarily," chuckled Mei Changsu coldly, "These are not the only two sons of the Emperor."

Meng Zhi had probably never considered the possibility of someone besides the Crown Prince and Prince Yu succeeding the throne. He asked with great astonishment, "You...you want to support Prince Jing?"

"Is there a reason why I should not?"

"I know that you and Prince Jing care for each other a lot, and I don't think lightly of his capabilities either. To be fair, his disadvantages are really trivial. They are only the low status of his mother and general lack of attention from the Emperor. These can all change if he performs well in the future. The crucial point is that Prince Jing is not good with political schemes by nature, and detests struggles for power. Yet, the struggle for the throne is such a dangerous affair. How can someone of his nature defeat the ruthless and powerful Crown Prince and Prince Yu?!"

Mei Changsu fiddled with the lid of his cup. He spoke expressionlessly, "So what if he is bad with political schemes by nature? He has me. I will take on those dark and bloody affairs. In order to take down people of evil, I am willing to stab innocent people in the heart. It would make me sad, but when a person's pain had once surpassed the limit, he can tolerate this level of sadness..."

His words were dark, but contained a bleakness and tragedy that was impossible to disguise. Meng Zhi stared at his face, dazed, and felt a sudden unbearable pain in his chest. Finally, he sighed and

asked quietly, “Then...would Prince Jing agree?”

“Why not? His hatred for the Crown Prince and Prince Yu runs as deeply as mine. Not to mention, there is the throne waiting for him at the end. The throne has a special appeal. Not many people can resist it. Not even Jingyan...”

“That’s impossible!” said Meng Zhi, striking the table. “So he detests power struggles, but it’s not like you enjoy them! When did Prince Jing turn so heartless? Doesn’t he care about you?”

“Meng,” smiled Mei Changsu dimly, “You forgot, Jingyan doesn’t know that it’s me... I am already dead. I am already a scar in his heart... The person threatening and luring him to walk upon the path to the throne is simply a stranger named Su Zhe. Why should he care?”

“Ah!” cried Meng Zhi, vexed. “Right, he doesn’t know... But didn’t you meet him today? You didn’t tell him? And he didn’t recognize you?”

“Why would I tell him?” Mei Changsu’s face was pale as snow, but his eyes were very calm. “Regardless of how innocent a friend was once upon a time, people who return from hell turn into demons. Not only was he unable to recognize me, I can’t recognize myself anymore either.”

Meng Zhi clasped his hands together, so tight that his knuckles turned white. He wanted to use this to diminish the pain of his heart tearing apart. He still remembered the eighteen-year-old him, with his brilliant smile and healthy, apple-red cheeks at departure. Twelve years had flown by. Upon looking back, it already felt like a previous lifetime.

“Shu...” The hand he took into his were thin and pale. Meng Zhi could only imagine what hardships and pain he had to overcome to struggle back to the world of the living.

“Promise me, don’t ever tell Jingyan.” Mei Changsu looked out

the window, his gaze blurred and distant. “The lively and cute friend he grew up with will never be the same person as the sinister and ruthless tactician. Isn’t it better this way?”

“Shu...”

“You and great-grandma are the only two people in the entire royal capital who knows about Lin Shu’s return. I don’t wish for there to be a third person, Meng. Please.”

“You can rest assured with me, but how did the Grand Empress Dowager find out? She’s been getting a little muddled in the recent years.”

“I don’t know how she recognized me either, as I look entirely different now. But when she looked at me and called me ‘little Shu’, her gaze was so warm. I am sure that she didn’t simply call me by the wrong name... Perhaps her foggy memory of the past allows her to be more at ease. I am only her little Shu. I am supposed to appear at her side. Perhaps that’s why she was so happy, and not at all surprised.”

Meng Zhi was a bit uneasy, “The Grand Empress Dowager wouldn’t say anything, would she?”

“She wouldn’t,” said Mei Changsu calmly. “Besides, nobody would really pay attention to anything she says now.”

“Ahh...” Meng Zhi gave a long sigh, “That’s true.”

Mei Changsu raised his cup of tea and took a sip. He was silent for a moment, then asked slowly, “Meng, since you are here today, I have a question I want to ask you...”

“Ask away.”

“We’ve secretly contacted each other many times these years. How come you never told me that Jingyu has a posthumous child?”

“What did you say?” Meng Zhi almost jumped up in

astonishment. “Prince Qi has a child?!”

Chapter 19: The Faded Past

“What did you say?” Meng Zhi almost jumped up in astonishment. “Prince Qi has a child?!”

“You didn’t know about this either?” Mei Changsu was a bit surprised. “Jingyan really kept a tight lid on the secret, but that’s hardly surprising. If even the slightest bit of news fall into the ears of the Crown Prince or Prince Yu, then Tingsheng’s life is forfeit...”

“Is it true?” asked Meng Zhi incredulously. “All the men in Prince Qi’s household have died. All the women were seized into the Secluded Courtyard, and anyone who had somewhat of a title was forced into the afterlife within a year. How could there possibly be a surviving orphan?”

Mei Changsu’s eyes were heavy. He thought deeply for a moment and answered, “I cannot deduce the details either. However, Jingyu’s Princess was intelligent and wise, and Xiutong was strong and brave. They were both outstanding women who were not at all inferior to men. Besides, everything was in such chaos then. It wouldn’t be impossible for them to have fought to preserve a bit of Jingyu’s blood and have him hidden away within the Secluded Courtyard. Going by the way Jingyan cares for Tingsheng, he had probably confirmed the child’s identity. There should be no mistake.”

“What about his looks? Does he look like Prince Qi?”

“The child had been tormented since birth. He’s yellow and thin, so it’s hard to tell. However, sometimes you’ll see a shadow of Jingyu around his brows and eyes.”

“Since Prince Jing knew that he is Prince Yu’s child, why didn’t he take better care of him? The child went through so much suffering!” Meng Zhi couldn’t hold back his complaints.

“He doesn’t have a choice either. It would inevitably raise suspicions if he looks after a little palace servant out of the blue. If Tingsheng’s identity is revealed by some accident, do you think the Crown Prince and Prince Yu would simply leave it alone?”

“But we can’t just let the child stay in a place like the Secluded Courtyard!” Meng Zhi stood up passionately and began to pace back and forth in the room. Feiliu sat up in his bed and stared at him with icy eyes, fully alert.

“Let’s sleep, Feiliu.” Mei Changsu turned and coaxed Feiliu, then turned to Meng Zhi. “Sit down first, Meng. I know you’re worried, but don’t you think that Jingyan and I are worried as well? We must save Jingsheng. However, the plan must be absolutely foolproof, and we must rescue him without harming a hair on his body.”

“Do you already have a plan?” asked Meng Zhi anxiously.

“I have a rough idea, but I still need to hammer out the details. We can’t rush this. Haste makes waste, right?” Mei Changsu gave a sidelong look at Meng Zhi and raised his eyebrows. “Meng, you’re the greatest warrior of Liang now, and carry the heavy responsibility of protecting the Emperor. I’ve heard people praise you from as far as Lang Prefecture for your calmness and strong will. How come you’re having such trouble containing yourself today?”

Meng Zhi scratched his head and gave a long sigh. “I don’t know what it is either. In any other situation, it wouldn’t be hard for me to maintain my composure even if a mountain blew up. But, speaking to you right now, I feel like I returned to my rash and reckless younger self... Do you still remember the Battle of Gourd Valley? If it were not for Prince Qi’s three personally written orders holding back my reins, I probably would’ve charged straight into the enemy’s trap. If I let Gourd Valley fall, your esteemed father definitely would’ve plucked my head off and give it a great kick.”

“It’s true that Father did not have much trust in you back then, but he also said later that he cannot compare to Prince Qi in regards to identifying talents. Prince Qi could single you out from thousands of soldiers during a single battle practise, even though you were not the most spectacular. My father could not match his great judgment...”

“But who could compare with your esteemed father in terms of his ingenious and formidable command over his troops? Oh, how glorious the Red Flame Army was in those years. Any army would tremble before it.” As he spoke of old memories, Meng Zhi felt a surge of pride that had been submerged for many years. How regretful that there was no wine before them. Instead, Meng Zhi grabbed his teacup and took a big gulp, lamenting, “It’s such a pity that I was forcefully transferred away from the Red Flames before I was there for long. If I were able to hone myself under Prince Qi and your esteemed father, I would be much more capable than I am now.”

Mei Changsu sighed faintly, “Along with any loss comes a gain, I suppose. If you were not transferred away from the Red Flames, putting aside the fact that you wouldn’t have been able to escape the devastation twelve years ago, you would not be the Commander of the Royal Guards today simply due to your identity as an old member of the Red Flame Army.”

Mei Changsu’s words immediately reminded Meng Zhi of something else. He gritted his teeth and spoke bitterly, “Not necessarily. Isn’t there an old member of the Red Flames standing magnificently in Court right now, surrounded by a halo of light as ‘the Empire’s Pillar’?”

Mei Changsu’s hand on the table shook, then stilled. His fingertips pressed on the red tabletop, as if they were about to leave a few prints.

“It feels so gross, having to put up a false front and pretend to be friendly with him for these years.” Meng Zhi exhaled a long

breath, as if trying to release all his melancholy. “And you. Why did you decide to come live in this place?”

“For safety,” answered Mei Changsu lightly.

“What? You think it’s safe here?”

“At least I can be rid of a lot of troubles.” Mei Changsu’s tone was like ice, chilling to the bone. “By taking advantage of those three young men, I am able to quickly come in contact with the important people at Court. This is certainly better than having my hands tied by entering Jinling as an aide due to the Crown Prince or Prince Yu’s summons.”

Meng Zhi thought it over and nodded in approval, but he saw Mei Changsu’s stiff expression and instinctively avoided delving deeper into this topic. He asked about something else instead, “What are your thoughts on this tournament for Princess Nihuang’s husband?”

“The Mu family of Yunnan is the empire’s protective screen of the south. The Princess had toiled away for the empire to the point of setting back her youth for many years. I only hope that she can find someone to love truly from this event. Everything else is unimportant.”

“Did you know that the Crown Prince and Prince Yu had both entered their own men into the tournament? If one of them succeeds, your goal would be much more difficult to achieve.”

“The Princess’s intelligence and zeal far exceeds mine, so there’s no need for me to worry about the tournament for her. However, the Yu and Yan empires still came forward to request a marriage even while knowing the slim chance of success. They must have an ace up their sleeves. You need to be extra cautious.”

“Mhmm!”

“It’s getting pretty late. You should head back. As soon as the plan for rescuing Tingsheng is solidified, I will ask for you to assist

me. Regarding Wei Zheng, I would also need to trouble you to watch them leave the capital, and tell them that they must not return again.”

Meng Zhi gave his promises and stood up. He took a step towards the exit, but then stopped, reluctant to leave. He turned and gazed at Mei Changsu. Meng Zhi's eyes were filled with cherish and concern for Mei Changsu, but he understood that there was a limit as to what he can do. He couldn't suppress the waves of sadness in his chest. Without much thought, he reached out his arms and gave Mei Changsu a tight hug.

The curtains around the bed fluttered slightly, and Feiliu shot out in a flash. He pointed his palm like a sword, aiming straight for Meng Zhi's throat. After Meng Zhi avoided the attack by stepping back, Feiliu immediately twisted into a tumble and delivered another chain of lethal attacks.

“Feiliu!” Mei Changsu stopped him hurriedly, “The uncle is saying his farewells to me. He's not bullying me. Don't be angry now, Feiliu...”

“Feiliu not allow!” Anger spread on the youth's icy face.

“Okay okay, it won't happen again in the future.” Mei Changsu smiled at Meng Zhi apologetically, “Sorry Meng. Our Feiliu has always been like this.”

“No worries. I'm really happy that this child is so protective of you.” Meng Zhi shot a friendly smile towards Feiliu. “You have to protect him well, okay?”

Feiliu ignored him. He remained on guard by his Su's side, not moving a single step.

“I'll be leaving, then.” Meng Zhi took another long look at Mei Changsu and spoke quietly, “Shu, you need to take care of your body. You cannot let anything happen to you, you hear?”

Mei Changsu's eyes grew hot. He hurriedly swallowed down his

surge of emotions, and nodded without speaking.

Feiliu glared at Meng Zhi. His face was still expressionless, but his eyes clearly showed his great impatience. As soon as Meng Zhi hopped over the windowsill and vanished, he immediately went to close the window tightly.

“What’s going on? Our Feiliu doesn’t like that uncle?” teased Mei Changsu in a soft tone.

“Doesn’t like!”

“How come?”

“Feiliu can’t win!”

“Don’t worry,” said Mei Changsu, caressing his hair. “Our Feiliu is still young. When you reach the uncle’s age, you will definitely be able to win against him.”

Feiliu’s expression still remained unchanged, but happiness immediately radiated from his eyes. Mei Changsu took his hand and led him to lie down on his bed. He tucked him in and quietly hummed a soft tune, staying by his side until he quietly closed his eyes. Only then did Mei Changsu leave quietly and go to bed himself.

Chapter 20: Baili Qi

Mei Changsu did not go to watch any more matches during the next few days. He stayed behind and rested at the Snow Cottage with the excuse of his poor health. Thankfully, after appraising him the other day, both the Crown Prince and Prince Yu did not think Mei Changsu to be someone who would easily yield to favour or might. As they have yet to come up with a new way to lure him to their side, neither party came forward to pester him. Mei Changsu spent his days reading books and playing the guqin, and focused his entire energy on recovery. As a result, he really began to look much healthier.

Since Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin had signed up, they had to fight in the tournament every day, and could not keep Su company as a result. On the other hand, Xie Bie appeared to have lots of free time. He would find some time every day to come over and chat about this and that with Mei Changsu. Their topics ranged far and wide, but not a word was mentioned about Prince Yu.

However, the Snow Cottage would liven up every day after dusk. Yan Yujin made enough noise for ten people, and would narrate the day's competition to Mei Changsu like a story. He would become especially animated when describing his and Xiao Jingrui's battles, using exceedingly vivid descriptions. It was as if he was describing some momentous, earth-shattering event, or some pivotal battle that will alter the tide of the martial arts world. It was probably more spectacular listening to him than seeing the event in person.

Xie Bi would frequently nudge his brother's arm and criticize, "Aren't you embarrassed by him? Is Yujin really talking about you? It sounds to me more and more like the deity [Erlang](#) has descended to earth. All you're missing is a celestial dog at your side."

Xiao Jingrui would usually give a wry grin, but he not once did

he stop Yan Yujin or shattered his enthusiasm.

In contrast, Feiliu would exclaim “Impossible!” from time to time, as he sat and stared at the sky coldly.

Yan Yujin mulled over it for awhile before he finally understood Feiliu’s meaning. From then on, he did not dare to make wild exaggerations as he was describing specific attacks.

Although Yan Yujin was guilty of bragging, he and Xiao Jingrui were undoubtedly first class in their strength. They had subdued their competitors without much effort in the first few rounds. There had been a few scares in the past two days, but they still ended their matches in victories.

The Emperor would appear punctually upon the Phoenix Building every day in order to attach importance to the event. Although everyone knew that he would watch one or two matches at most before leaving, they still felt very honoured by his presence. Marrying Princess Nihuang was not the sole aim for most of the young men who entered the tournament. After all, the position only had one opening, and the difficulty was too great. Most people used this tournament as an opportunity to present their talents, hoping to improve their fame in the martial arts world through battles, or to improve their status by catching the eye of some high authority.

Just like that, the tournament proceeded along merrily, with everything according to plan, and attracted the eyes of the entire world as anticipated. Every day, someone would leave the stage dejectedly, and some rookie would rise to fame with a single battle. The final result represented the combination of fame, fortune, and power. Compared to that, this entire process could not be described as dull. At most, it was not unexpected enough.

However, though the unexpected arrived late, it arrived nonetheless.

At dusk during the seventh day of the tournament, Mei Changsu

realized that something astonishing must've occurred when he saw the solemn expressions on the faces of Yan Yujin and Xiao Jingrui, who rushed into the Snow Cottage.

“Su! Su!” The one making a racket as soon as he entered was, of course, Yan Yujin. He had run there, giving his cheeks a pinch of redness and his forehead some droplets of sweat. He rushed in, dragged a bamboo stool over, and sat down. He spoke hurriedly before he had a chance to catch his breath, “Oh no, there’s a huge problem!”

“What’s wrong?” Mei Changsu placed down the book in his hands and sat up. “Did you and Jingrui lose?”

“What’s the big deal even if we lost? But Shangzhi lost today!”

“Qin Shangzhi?” Mei Changsu raised his eyebrows nonchalantly. “Even though he is a skilled combatant amongst the young men, he certainly has yet to reach the pinnacle of martial arts. Why should it be so astonishing for him to lose?”

Xiao Jingrui had sat down beside Mei Changsu as well, and replied very seriously, “It’s not astonishing for him to lose, but he was defeated in a single move!”

Mei Changsu was shocked, “How’s that possible? Even if his opponent was Commander Meng himself, he shouldn’t be defeated in a single move.”

“That’s why I said there’s a huge problem!” exclaimed Yan Yujin with a stomp.

“Could it be that the person who defeated him is not a citizen of Liang?”

“We wouldn’t be so worried if he was a citizen of Liang. This person is from the northern Yan empire. His name is pretty weird, called Baili Qi¹. He was pretending to have a lot of difficulties in the previous rounds, but he suddenly became fierce today, with tomorrow being the last round. It appears that not only is he

looking to win, but he also plans on shaking up the remaining competitors during the process.”

Mei Changsu frowned, “Besides Tuoba Hao, the Yan actually have someone of such caliber?”

“This person is practising a sturdy form of martial arts. His looks are coarse, and he’s covered in steel-like muscles. Shangzi took him lightly as a boor, and was rather careless. As a result, Baili Qi received his first attack head-on without even attempting to dodge. Then, before he had a chance to retreat, Baili Qi dislocated his shoulder with one palm strike, which rendered Shangzi unable to move his arm and thus forced to admit defeat.” Xiao Jingrui was just as worried, but his anxiety was not as exposed. He only showed a darkened face, and continued with a rather stable tone, “It’s a bit unfair to say that he was defeated in a single strike, but it’s true that Baili Qi possesses outstanding strength. He may not have much of an advantage if he uses his brute force on someone with a solid foundation and intense inner energy like Commander Meng, but...”

He paused as he reached this part in his speech, as if unwilling to state it clearly. Still, Mei Changsu had already discerned the meaning of his unspoken words.

Princess Nihuang was, after all, a woman. Her nature of combat focused on technique, and was only supplemented with strength. She would be greatly disadvantaged if she faces an opponent who practised a sturdy form of martial arts like Baili Qi. If she happens to make a blunder, then there really will be a huge problem.

“Don’t freak out yet,” cut in Xie Bi, who had already been in the Snow Cottage before the two arrived. “This is not necessarily a hopeless case going by the procedure of the tournament. Even if that Baili Qi enters the top ten in the martial arts tournament, the literary arts tournament is still at the discretion of the Emperor. It’ll be fine if His Majesty just ranks him as the last candidate.”

Mei Changsu's gaze grew a bit more focused. He shook his head, "But this way, there would be no guarantee that the tournament will conclude according to Princess Nihuang's own wishes. Originally, if she did not like a candidate, she only had to defeat him. If she did not like anyone within the ten candidates, she didn't have to marry. However, with the appearance of a skilled fighter today who is both someone so difficult to defeat and someone she would never wish to marry, he remains a threat even if he was placed in the last position. To prevent the possibility of losing to him in the end, the Princess will be forced to choose a husband from the nine candidates before him. I'm afraid that it would be an utter humiliation for someone so proud to be forced to face such a situation."

"The last round will take place tomorrow, and the final ten candidates will be chosen. Why don't you come take a look as well, Su?" Xiao Jingrui leaned in closer to Mei Changsu and continued quietly, "Your knowledge in martial arts far exceeds ours. Perhaps you would be able to judge the level of danger Baili Qi poses, and figure out how to deal with him."

"Are you or Yujin going to face him?"

"No," denied Xiao Jingrui, shaking his head. "Neither Jingrui nor I am in the same group as him. Regardless of our victory or defeat tomorrow, we will not face him. However, if he wins tomorrow, then he will definitely be in the top ten. I hope you would agree to observe him, so as to give Princess Nihuang some helpful suggestions."

"That's right that's right," echoed Yan Yujin. "Jingrui's martial arts wasn't necessarily better than mine before, but he actually shot above me after receiving Su's advice during their journey."

Mei Changsu smiled lightly, "The Princess already possesses top rank combat skills, so the suggestions I can make will be limited. She's different from Jingrui. Jingrui's skills weren't as great as hers, so there was more room for improvement."

“Su,” grimaced Xiao Jingrui, “Can’t you say it a bit more delicately? That stung...”

“However, it really is too dangerous for Princess Nihuang to immediately face off with an unfamiliar yet skilled fighter after just the one round tomorrow.” Mei Changsu’s two neat brows knitted together. “We need to think of something in order to add another barrier in between.”

“Do you already have a plan, Su?” pried Yan Yujin impatiently.

“Before the last round tomorrow, the Emperor can issue an edict to add in an additional two days of challenge rounds.”

“Challenge rounds?”

“Yes. The reason will be to eliminate any unfairness in the tournament due to the division of groups. The final ten champions tomorrow will be the ones to be challenged. Any of those who were defeated during the past few days can challenge any champion outside of their group at will. If he wins in a battle, then he can replace the original champion’s position and become a new person to be challenged. The final ten candidates after two days of battles will be the actual people who can partake in the literary tournament. None of the people with the guts to challenge the champions will be mediocre. Even if they cannot defeat Baili Qi, it will at least create some more experiences for the Princess.”

The three noble gentlemen bobbed their heads up and down. “That’s a great idea!” praised Yan Yujin.

“However, someone would need to enter the Palace tonight and ask the Emperor to issue an edict immediately,” reminded Mei Changsu off-handedly.

Yan Yujin rushed to answer without even thinking, “That’s a piece of cake. I’ll enter the Palace right away!”

“No need no need!”, said Xie Bi, stopping him quickly. He was a bit embarrassed, but he still begged with a flushed face in the end,

“Can we have Prince Yu go to His Majesty?”

Nobody seated was stupid. They immediately understood what he was planning as soon as he spoke. They glanced at him together, and nobody spoke.

The Emperor had probably received a report on Baili Qi by then, and was likely anxious as well. If someone were to raise this suggestion before the Emperor, His Majesty would certainly be delighted. The Princess will naturally be indebted to this person as well. A new opportunity will land in the laps of the defeated candidates, so of course, they would be even happier. Even the ten champions will mind their reputation, and would refrain from strong opposition to maintain their strong front. So, regardless of how you look at it, this suggestion was in everyone's best interest. It's no wonder that Xie Bi was willing to embarrass himself in order to snatch this opportunity for Prince Yu.

“Since Xie Bi wants to offer his legs on this run, then go,” permitted Mei Changsu lightly after awhile.

Xie Bi was overjoyed. He gave his thanks again and again, then stood up swiftly and left without any further delay.

An odd silence descended upon the room after he left. Mei Changsu leaned his head back on the warm pillow and closed his eyes to recharge. Xiao Jingrui had never enjoyed associating with this sort of business. Besides, it was his younger brother, so he could only stay silent. Even though Yan Yujin wasn't aligned with any party, he was still somewhat connected with Prince Yu due to Empress Yan, so he couldn't exactly make any comments either. All of a sudden, the air became rather still.

Quite a bit of time passed before Yan Yujin finally had enough of sitting around in silence. He thought of another question and asked, “Say, isn't it strange? Going by Baili Qi's display yesterday, he should be able to squeeze into the world's top ten no matter what. How come there isn't a hint of him in the Langya

Rankings?”

Xiao Jingrui spoke before Mei Changsu had a chance to answer, “You don’t know, huh? And you dare to call yourself cosmopolitan. Langya’s List of Martial Artists has stated from the start that it only ranks the martial artists based on the skills that they have already displayed. Those who remain obscure and never reveal themselves to the world will not be considered by Langya Hall as long as they do not use their skills, even if they are peerless martial artists. Of course, sometimes the rankings will astonish people, but that is only due to Langya Hall’s amazing ability to collect information quickly and thoroughly. They can obtain the results of many covert and private battles, so there will be some discrepancies with the general perceptions. With such attentions he’s attracted, Baili Qi will definitely enter the List of Martial Artists next year.”

“Psh, aren’t you just relying on the stuff you learned from Su? To think that you’re even lecturing me now.” Yan Yujin puffed his cheeks, unwilling to accept the loss. “I’m going to move into the Snow Cottage tomorrow!”

Xiao Jingrui laughed, “You’re even noisier than a crow. Even if Su can bear with you, Feiliu would not be willing...”

Before his voice faded away, a chilly voice suddenly sounded from the treetops above, “Feiliu not willing!” It gave Yan Yujin a big fright, and he quickly shuffled closer towards Mei Changsu.

“Feiliu’s back.” A smile appeared on Mei Changsu’s face. He began to raise his hand, and Feiliu leaned into him in a flash.

“Is it fun outside?”

“Not fun!”

“Feiliu doesn’t like the idea of Yujin coming to live here?”

“Doesn’t like!”

“Why not?”

“Very similar!”

Yan Yujin blinked with curiosity, “Very similar to what?”

Mei Changsu laughed, “He’s saying you feel very similar to Lin Chen of our East River Alliance. He’s a person who Feiliu absolutely cannot stand.” He turned back to Feiliu and teased, “Why do you think they’re similar? Yujin has never teased you, has he?”

Feiliu glared at the Empress’s nephew coldly. His voice was like a block of ice as he answered, “He wants to tease!”

“Oy oy oy,” protested Yan Yujin, waving his hands hastily, “The virtuous doesn’t make a judgment based on imagination. You’ll kill off an innocent person this way...”

“That’s right,” laughed Mei Changsu, gasping for breath, “Don’t mind him, Feiliu. There are snacks left for you inside, all of them your favourites. Go in and eat.”

Feiliu said an “okay”, then glared at Yan Yujin again before disappearing in a flash.

Xiao Jingrui looked at his good friend’s expression and bowed over in laughter. It was a long while before he slowly ceased his laughter, and patted Yan Yujin’s shoulders in consolation.

Yan Yujin put on a gracious air and waved his hand, “You seldom have the opportunity to laugh at me, so I’ll just let you laugh to your heart’s content.” He turned to Mei Changsu again and asked, “Then will you go tomorrow, Su?”

“Since there’s such entertainment, of course.” Mei Changsu smiled gently at him and continued, “However, this idea of a challenge round will create inconveniences for you two. I do apologize.”

“It’s much better this way! Everyone will be relying on their actual abilities,” responded Yan Yujin. He gave a hearty chuckle, “It really didn’t sit right with me, having people taking care of us.”

Xiao Jingrui asked, dumbfounded, “What’s this about being taken care of?”

Yan Yujin gave him a sidelong glance, “You’re this dense, and you still had the gall to laugh at me?”

“Jingrui,” said Mei Changsu in a low voice, patting his hand, “This is a tournament to choose a husband, not a soldier. The Court would naturally take care of young men like you two with good looks, good personality, and good family backgrounds. Don’t you think that the people in your groups are especially weak?”

“Oh?” Because Xiao Jingrui had a kind and gentle nature, he never liked to analyze too deeply into any matter, and really did not realize. He was stunned.

Yan Yujin pounced on this opportunity and spoke darkly by his ear, “You thought you were pretty impressive, didn’t you? Whether it’s in your travels or in the capital, who would believe you if you deny receiving any benefits from your identity?”

“Yujin!” Mei Changsu smiled while frowning, “What kind of best friend are you? Do you want to continue until Jingrui gets upset?”

“Su, you shouldn’t coddle him so much,” said Yan Yujin, shaking his head, “It’s better for him to see certain issues clearly. Jingrui is a bit too honest. That’s not good. He needs to be like me. Even though I’m carefree, I can’t be muddled in the things that must be understood clearly.”

Mei Changsu’s gaze suddenly turned complex. He sighed softly and said, “You certainly are a whimsical and easygoing person. It would be great if Jingrui can be like you...”

Xiao Jingrui looked at one, then at the other. He couldn’t help raising his hand between them, and said with displeasure, “Stop! Stop! What are you guys talking about? It’s not like I’m stupid. Besides, even if I’m a bit naïve, I should at least be better than this heartless person here, right?”

Mei Changsu replied warmly, “You are, of course, an amazing person, and I hope that we can always get along with each other like this. However, you really value relationships by your nature, and this will inevitably hurt you in the future. We are only worrying for you in advance.”

Xiao Jingrui saw that he spoke sincerely. A warm feeling surged into his heart, and he replied immediately, “Please rest assured, Su. Life is full of ups and downs that serve to hone one’s spirit. No matter how feeble I am, it is not to the extent that I would worry my friends by falling into perpetual despondency when I face a problem...” After he finished, his tone suddenly changed. He looked at Yan Yujin from the corners of his eyes and said, “As for you, save it. Stop copying Su and pretending to be profound.”

“Oy oy,” said Yan Yujin, planting his arms on his hips, “You’re moved to bits when Su is worried about you, but when I worry about you, you glare at me? Isn’t the difference a bit too much?”

“What pride could I have to speak of,” said Xiao Jingrui, looking at Yan Yujin from the corners of his eyes still, “If I let a pampered thing like you fret over me? Get away from me.”

“You dare to look down on me? Let’s fight!” Yan Yujin rolled up his sleeves and pounced. The two wrestled together like schoolboys, fighting noisily without using any proper techniques. Even Feiliu was alerted by the clamour and poked his head outside to see the commotion.

Mei Changsu watched them with a faint smile. Yet, there was some unfathomable expression in the depth of his eyes.

Notes:

[1](#) His name is literally “hundred li marvel/oddity”, where 1 li = 500m. Basically, a strange guy.

Chapter 21: Guidepost Of Mu

Mei Changsu arrived before the Phoenix Building the next day as promised. He took a seat within the Marquess of Ning's tent, with Xie Bi accompanying him at his side. Sure enough, before the tournament began, a eunuch in green robes appeared, a Royal Edict in hand, and announced the new addition to the tournament. It was a Royal Edict, and there was sufficient justification, so nobody voiced any opposition. The announcement quickly concluded and did not delay the start of the tournament.

Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin had matches towards the beginning of the tournament and both entered the stage before long. Regardless of how weak the group was, it was impossible for a mediocre man to enter the last round, so their opponents were rather impressive. Xiao Jingrui entered the stage first to compete against a young swordsman in his twenties. The two were of similar age and used the same weapons, and went head-to-head as soon as the match began. They returned speed with agility, and strength with power. Their fight was a dazzling display, but it was completely lacking in ingenuity. However, such a battle would certainly show a swift outcome. Xiao Jingrui was the superior in techniques, so his opponent admitted his defeat briskly and left the stage without further ado. He seemed to be a rather forthright person by his actions and temperament. Mei Changsu saw from a distance that Meng Zhi had ordered someone to summon the young swordsman to him. Presumably, Meng Zhi liked his temper and wanted to gather him under his command.

Once Yan Yujin's opponent entered the stage, it was apparent that he was a worldly martial artists rich in battle experiences. His steps were firm and his gaze was steady. His square face was weathered by the elements, and he had high bloated temples. His two palms were thick with callouses, showing his diligence in training. He was a sharp contrast with the handsome and delicate

nephew of the Empress, who was ruffling his fan upon the stage. This was going to be interesting.

“Speaking of which, this is my first time seeing Yujin in combat,” said Mei Changsu. He switched his gaze back and forth between the battle upon the stage and Xiao Jingrui, who had just entered the tent and settled into his seat. “I’ve always found it a bit strange. You have a background with Heaven’s Spring, and your father here possesses military decorations, so it is only natural for you to be skilled in martial arts. However, the Yan family has had civil officials in every generation, and it is a noble family without any ties to the martial arts world. Yet, you guys have always claimed that his skills are on par with yours in your conversations. I finally figured it out today. So, Yujin is actually a disciple of the Kun Sect. I’ve underestimated him.”

Xiao Jingrui explained hastily, “Yujin has not entered the Kun Sect, nor is he a recognized disciple. Due to a severe illness during his youth, he needed a high-level mantra to protect his body. The Master of the Kun Sect was old friends with his grandpa, the deceased Grand Preceptor Yan, so he accepted Yujin as a disciple in name only. This was never publicized, so we did not especially mention it to you.”

Mei Changsu smiled. He did not respond, and instead focused his eyes upon the stage. The martial art style of the Kun Sect was famous for its maneuvers and techniques. The sect was very strict with the aptitude of their disciples, and was less concerned with whether or not they were diligent in their practise. It fitted Yan Yujin’s personality perfectly. His robes fluttered as he whisked around the stage, a light breeze flowing from his fan. The degree of his damage was yet to be seen, but his dashing handsomeness was certainly first rate.

“It appears that I was not the only one to underestimate him. The Langya Hall Master had been imprecise in his ranking as well.” Mei Changsu gave a clap and laughed. The moment his two palms

touched, an attack sent a grey streak flying out from the stage. Yan Yujin pranced gracefully to the middle of the stage in his fine clothes and fragrant fan. He lifted his chin up slightly, his big eyes appearing to sweep every angle below the stage.

“I don’t think there’s any imprecision,” said Xie Bi, tilting his head. “Look at that frivolous air. It’s pretty generous to let him be tenth!”

Xiao Jingrui was already used to the ways of his good friend, and he simply pretended to not have noticed. He leaned closer to Mei Changsu and spoke by his ear, “Baili Qi will be in the next match.”

Mei Changsu inclined his head slightly and raised his cup to sip some tea. Right then, Yan Yujin sauntered in proudly, and loudly asked if they had paid attention to his awe-inspiring performance upon the stage.

“You call that awe-inspiring?” Xiao Jingrui couldn’t resist, and began to tease, “I think your opponent was actually blinded by your fluttering fan and slipped off the stage himself.”

“You’re just jealous of me,” pouted Yan Yujin, and ignored him. He walked straight to Mei Changsu’s side and squeezed Xie Bi away. “What do you think, Su? I have better aptitude than Jingrui, right?”

“That’s true,” chuckled Mei Changsu, “But you like to fool around a bit too much. It clearly could’ve ended in fifty moves, but you had to drag it to sixty-three. Was it for me to see your ‘Falling Petals’ technique?”

Yan Yujin froze for a moment, and a hint of admiration flashed in his eyes. “You have sharp eyes, Su. It’s unfortunate that my opponent isn’t some flower-like beauty, or the attack would really make her flutter to the ground like falling petals.”

Xiao Jingrui snorted, “If your opponent was actually some beautiful lady, the one fluttering to the ground would be you!”

“Stop messing around, the next people are out. Is that Baili Qi?” asked Xie Bi, knocking on the table.

Everyone raised their heads. The contestants for the next match were indeed already standing upon the stage. One of them had a pleasing figure with broad shoulders, long limbs, and a narrow waist. He was dressed neatly in a blue outfit, light armor circling his waist. He held a fang lance in his hand. By his weapon, he seemed to be a military man suited for cavalry battles. Clearly, he must be rather exceptional to qualify for the last round. The person he was facing was exceedingly stocky. He had bulging muscles from head to toe, which could be seen from even underneath his clothes. His huge hands were empty. It was, of course, the person who had astounded everybody yesterday through a single battle—Baili Qi.

“Such a boorish and ugly person definitely cannot be a good match for the Princess,” said Xie Bi. It was his first time seeing Baili Qi, and he was more roused than the others. “Besides, he is a foreigner from the Yan empire. We need to think of a way to drive him off, no matter what.”

“Who is that person?”

“Let me check,” said Xie Bi, flipping through the programme in his hands. “He is a Lieutenant General of the Divine Might Battalion. His name is Fang Lance... Eh? He actually has the same name as his weapon...”

“Brother, that’s not what Su’s asking.” Xiao Jingrui gave Xie Bi a shove, and turned to Mei Changsu, “That is the little Prince Mu who had just recently succeeded the title of the Prince of Yunnan. I suppose he heard the news yesterday and is worried about his sister, and decided to sit outside to get a clearer view.”

“Jingrui, that’s not what Su’s asking either,” snickered Yan Yujin. “He’s wearing robes embroidered with silver dragons, and he’s sitting underneath a magnificent tent with the character of

Mu. Anybody with eyes can see that he is the little Prince Mu. Su is asking about the person standing behind the little Prince.”

“Do you know who he is?” asked Mei Changsu, tilting his head over.

“I don’t know.”

“If you don’t know, then what’re you blabbering on about?” Xiao Jingrui stood up, “I’ll go ask around.”

Mei Changsu reached out and stopped him. “There’d no need. I only asked out of curiosity as the person possesses an impressive aura about him. I suppose he ought to be some important officer in the Manor of Mu. There’s no need to inquire into the details.”

“He is our manor’s General Zhangsun,” said a sudden voice at the tent’s entrance. Xiao Jingrui shot up immediately to shield everyone behind him.

A middle-aged person appeared. He was dressed in the crimson uniform of officials, and had three strands of whiskers flowing from his chin. He bowed in greeting, “I have been presumptuous in my visit. Please forgive me if I have startled anyone.”

“So it is the esteemed Guidepost of the Manor of Mu.” Even though Xie Bi did not recognize the visitor, he could still guess his identity from his outfit. He stood up and returned the greeting, “To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit, sir?”

Before the visitor had a chance to reply, Yan Yujin shouted suddenly, “Ah! He lost!”

Mei Changsu looked at Baili Qi, who had already defeated his opponent during their idle chatter, and was now standing upon the stage expressionlessly. Mei Changsu shook his head and sighed. Even though the battle today was not decided in a single move, the match was still completely one-sided. There was nothing mysterious to Baili Qi’s techniques. He was simply sturdy and strong. His opponent attempted in vain to battle strength with

technique, and was defeated during a slip in his defence.

The middle-aged man in crimson took this opportunity to say, "I am Guidepost Wei Jingan of the Manor of Mu. I came to request an audience with Mr. Su regarding precisely this matter."

"There's no need to be so polite. What's the need for requesting an audience when you're already here? A visitor is a guest. Sit, sit," said Yan Yujin with ease, as if he was the master within this tent of the Marquess of Ning. He dragged a chair over.

"Many thanks," said Wei Jingan. He actually dropped the pleasantries as suggested, and went straight to the point, "Nobody is as anxious about this tournament for Princess Nihuang's husband as our people in the Manor of Mu. Baili Qi astonished everyone with his performance yesterday. Even though our Princess is as calm as usual, our little Prince is very anxious. Thus, he especially ordered me to come see Mr. Su and make an inquiry as to whether or not any actions should be placed in motion."

Once he finished, even Mei Changsu himself couldn't hide his incredulous expression, not to mention the others.

The group gathered in the tent had certainly been discussing the matter of Baili Qi. However, that was only due to a feeling of concern that arose from their respect for Princess Nihuang as a citizen of Liang. Yet, going by the words of Wei Jingan, it sounded like this problem was supposed to be Mei Changsu's responsibility right from the start.

"Guidepost Wei," said Mei Changsu carefully after some consideration, "Could it be that the little Prince is under the impression that I should take some sort of action?"

"Is there no need for action still?" Wei Jingan raised his brows. "Or could it be that Mr. Su does not believe that Baili Qi could pose a viable threat?"

"I do not dare to make such claims at present. However, what I

find odd is...why would the little Prince want to ask me?”

Wei Jingan was a bit shocked as well. His eyes widened, “Didn’t Mr. Su already have an agreement with our Princess that this tournament is only held to obey the orders of His Majesty, and that nobody will be chosen in actuality?”

These words were even more mind-blowing than the ones before. The young men were dumbfounded. They all stared stupefied at Mei Changsu.

Since he entered the capital, Mei Changsu had only ever been alone with Princess Nihuang for that little while. Who could’ve imagined that he moves so swiftly? Even such a promise has been pledged, and he didn’t make a peep even when he watched everyone run around in circles for the tournament. He really knew how to keep his calm.

Of course, Mei Changsu himself was also flabbergasted. He was just about to defend himself, but he began to cough from breathing in some cold air. Xiao Jingrui looked on from the side with a long face. However, he still softened after a little bit and came over to pat Mei Changsu’s back to ease his coughs.

“Guidepost Wei, I do not know how such claims came to be. However, I must still trouble you to give a reply to the little Prince.” Mei Changsu drank some hot tea to moisten his throat and continued, “The Princess had indeed instructed me to complete a task for her, but the matter is very different than what you spoke of. I’m afraid that the little Prince is probably misunderstanding something.”

“Misunderstanding something?” Wei Jingan froze. “Then what matter did the Princess entrust to you?”

“The Princess was only worried about the Emperor feeling fatigued, and entrusted me to assist with the literary tournament of the top ten candidates and help her arrange their rankings somewhat. There was no mention of anything else.”

He didn't appear to be lying to Wei Jingan. Besides, Mei Changsu did not have any reason to lie to him. Wei Jingan was at a loss for what to do. He did not know what sort of miscommunication occurred between the Princess and the little Prince, but going by the little Prince's instructions today, this Su Zhe should be someone the Princess holds in high trust and great fondness. Mei Changsu appeared graceful when Wei Jingan first laid eyes upon him, but he was sickly and weak, and did not seem to be a good match for his heroic Princess. It works out fine if he denies those claims.

"Please forgive my rashness then, Mr. Su." Wei Jingan bowed politely. "But even so, the Princess must already view you as a friend to entrust to you a matter of such importance as the literary tournament. May I suppose that you will not stand idle in the matter of Baili Qi either?"

"I dare not do anything but try my hardest. I must urge the little Prince to refrain from being overly troubled as well. The Princess had calmed many storms and settled many predicaments in her days. She would not make a mistake in her marriage. I believe that this matter will be promptly resolved as well."

"I hope it goes according to your auspicious words." Wei Jingan was a straightforward person. Once he had finished, there was no need for more courteous exchange. He bowed to everyone in the tent and left.

"Feiliu's not here today?" asked Yan Yujin, watching his disappearing figure. "We didn't notice since there's always people coming and going, but he actually came straight to our entrance and heard us talk..."

"There's a fair at East Market today, so I let Feiliu go there to play," answered Mei Changsu, smiling. "However, the Guidepost is a civil office, and yet he possesses such skills in the lightfooted arts. Look at the air of that General Zhangsun serving next to the little Prince as well. The Manor of Mu is truly filled with talents,

and Yunnan is certainly worthy of its fame as the world's greatest principality."

"Also, no one from Yunnan signed up for such a large-scale tournament. One can see that to them, the Princess is truly someone to be worshipped but never touched," added Xie Bi.

"Jingrui, why are you upset?" asked Mei Changsu, who had found an unusual expression on the young man beside him.

Xiao Jingrui mumbled with a rigid expression, "Why didn't you tell me that the Princess had asked you to oversee the literary tournament?"

"What, was Su supposed to report it to you?" asked Xie Bi incredulously.

Mei Changsu did not mock him, but rather explained patiently and warmly, "Jingrui, of course I must agree to such a request from the Princess. However, overseeing the literary tournament is such an important matter. It can't be decided with just the Princess's invitation, and would require the Emperor's royal permission. I have not received any Royal Edicts in these days, so I supposed that His Majesty has not given permission. Because of that, I did not mention it to you guys."

"It's normal to not have mentioned it. Su is such a responsible person, so he naturally wouldn't jabber about something still undecided." Xie Bi laughed out loud. "What I'm finding strange is why you're so upset, brother."

Xiao Jingrui also thought that he was being unreasonable after thinking it over a bit, and blushed slightly.

Yan Yujin covered his mouth and laughed for awhile too. He said mockingly, "It's because Jingrui likes Su, of course. He's always thinking that since he was the one to invite Su to Jinling, he should be the closest with Su. Now he discovered someone else being close with Su too, who he didn't know about, of course he'd

be jealous.”

“W-Who’s jealous?!”

“My brother has been stingy like this since he was young. He clings on to anything he likes, and wouldn’t let me touch them at all. How come you’re still like this when you’re all grown up?”

“What’re you babbling about, you brat? What did I cling on to and not give you?”

“That chestnut stallion!”

“That horse was too spirited. You fell whenever you tried to ride him, so of course I didn’t dare to let you ride him anymore. What if you were knocked silly?”

“And Lin Shu!” exclaimed Yan Yujin, adding to the chaos. “You were happy as a clam when Lin Shu taught you archery, but then you discovered the next day that he taught me too. You ended up not talking to me for days!”

Mei Changsu felt his heart freeze, as if all the blood in his body gathered and congealed there. His face suddenly turned pale.

“What’s wrong?” Xiao Jingrui rushed over and asked anxiously, “Do you feel unwell again? You’re like this a lot these days. Are Dr. Xun’s pills ineffective?”

“An elixir of life does not exist.” Mei Changsu managed a smile, “I’m already much better than before. There’s only a short pain with an attack, and I would recover soon after.”

“It’s too cold here inside the tent,” said Yan Yujin, bringing over a fur cloak, “I’ll tell them to add another firepit.”

“It’s not even winter yet. There’s no need.” Mei Changsu looked at Yan Yujin and Xie Bi and grinned, “Do you two usually gang up like this to bully Jingrui?”

“That’s right,” answered Yan Yujin happily. “It’s really fun to bully him. Do you want to join, Su?”

“Oy, you...”

Mei Changsu turned and pressed Xiao Jingrui as he spoke quietly, “You’ve been friends with him for so long. Don’t you know him yet? The more riled up you are, the happier he gets. Just ignore him, and he wouldn’t be able to have fun by himself.”

“Hmph. Su really is biased towards Jingrui,” protested Yan Yujin. “But it’s no big deal even if you teach him, since I can always think up a new way to bully him. Are you scared, Jingrui?”

Xiao Jingrui was a smart person and a fast learner. He ignored Yan Yujin this time, and focused on chatting quietly with Mei Changsu. The Empress’s nephew saw that his attack had fallen through, and found it really boring. He circled around in the tent for a bit, then ran outside again to entertain himself with who knows what.

Book 2: The Stirring of the Wind

Chapter 22: Emperor Of Liang

That day, Mei Changsu stayed and watched until the very last round before returning home. He barely ate any dinner due to his fatigue, which made Xiao Jingrui and Feiliu very worried. Still, he insisted on watching the challenge rounds in the next two days from beginning to end, saying that he cannot betray the Princess's trust.

The addition of challenge rounds was clearly effective. Three of the final ten contestants were eliminated after being challenged. The final ten champions drank their Royal Wine and received their rewards of golden flowers. They were to enter the Royal Palace for the literary tournament after resting for three days.

"Su, you look like you're not satisfied with any of us within the final ten," commented Yan Yujin that night, twirling his golden flower. The group was gathered in the Snow Cottage.

"You guys are pretty much the cream of the crop," sighed Mei Changsu, "But whenever I think of the magnificence and grace of Princess Nihuang, I feel that the candidates are still lacking in some ways."

"Are Jingrui and I lacking something too?" challenged Yan Yujin, unwilling to accept the judgment. "We're probably the most likable people in the capital, whether it's in terms of character or looks!"

Mei Changsu glanced at the two and refuted with certainty, "You two are too young."

Yan Yujin rolled his eyes at the response. "How can you hold our age against us? It's not like we wanted to be born a few years after the Princess!"

"Oh, stop messing around," said Xiao Jingrui, giving him a shove. "We only entered to fill the numbers anyway, so that we

could filter out some more unqualified candidates for the Princess.”

“Oy, don’t drag me into this ‘filling the numbers’ business, okay? I’m actually serious!” Yan Yujin put on a solemn expression.

“When have you ever been serious in all your years alive? Even if you are, it’s useless. What lady would like a husband younger than her?”

“Ha!” snickered Yan Yujin. “Look at you lecturing me. Ms. Yun is older than you by six years. Count it out, how many years have you pursued her for?”

Mei Changsu saw Xiao Jingrui freeze from the retort and interjected hurriedly, “Jingrui is a candid person. Regardless of how much he cared for Ms. Yun, he was never forceful or persistent, nor did he pestered her in any way. You should mimic him now and allow the Princess to make her own decision, as a truly carefree and upstanding young man.”

Yan Yujin clasped his hand over his heart and complained bitterly, “You finally found someone to support you, Jingrui. It’s going to be hard to bully you in the future with Su protecting you...”

Everyone cracked up over his dramatic display, and the atmosphere immediately relaxed.

While everyone was happily chattering away, a servant suddenly dashed inside in a panic. He said while panting, “A eunuch from the Royal Palace arrived to announce an edict. The Marquess asked everyone to hurry to the front hall...”

These people were all used to seeing Royal Edicts and were not alarmed. They stood up and began to say their farewells to Mei Changsu.

“N... No...” said the servant hastily, “It’s mainly Mr. Su... Mr. Su needs to receive the edict...”

“Me?” Mei Changsu was startled, but after some thought, he figured that he wouldn’t be able to get any answers from the servant anyway. Hence, he stood and changed his attire, then followed everyone to the front hall.

The eunuch standing before the front hall did not carry a Royal Edict. He waited until everyone bowed to the ground, then flicked his long brush and announced in a high voice, “By the Emperor’s decree, Su Zhe is summoned to appear before His Majesty tomorrow after the Morning Court Session.”

Everyone paid their gratitudes and rose. The young men guessed that Princess Nihuang must have made a report to the Emperor, and were not surprised. Princess Liyang was not in the manor that night. Thus, the only person who felt surprised was the Marquess of Ning, Xie Yu. He usually buries himself in politics and pays no attention to other affairs. As such, he did not pay much mind to this guest in the Snow Cottage, and was naturally confused by why the Emperor would wish to summon a commoner. However, it would be rather rude to ask that, so he pondered for a moment and asked politely, “Would Mr. Su happen to know why His Majesty wishes to see you tomorrow in the Palace? It would allow me to assist you in making any necessary preparations.”

Mei Changsu understood his intent and replied lightly, “I have no special talents, and only receive some undue admiration for my perception. Two days ago, Princess Nihuang had invited me to help her in overseeing the literary tournament. I am guessing that this is likely the reason behind the Emperor’s summons.”

Although Xie Yu was shocked, he quickly realized that there was nothing to be bewildered about when he remembered the renowned talent of Mr. Mei of East River. He felt immediate relief, and returned to the back courtyard after giving a slight bow.

The next morning, a carriage from the Manor of Mu arrived for Mr. Su, confirming everyone’s conjectures. Although the noble young gentlemen were of high status, the Royal Palace was not

exactly the marketplace after all, and they could not accompany Su simply because they wanted to. So, even though the worried was worried and the curious was curious, in the end, Mei Changsu entered the carriage alone. He even tossed a task at Xiao Jingrui along the way—taking care of Feiliu.

The carriage rode to outer walls of the Palace, then it was switched with a litter covered in blue silk. Mei Changsu suddenly felt his emotions swell. He hastily closed his eyes to meditate and restore his calm and clarity. He exited the litter after entering the Righteous Gate. According to the route, he was probably heading to the Hall of Military Eminence. Just as he turned at the corner of the hall, he met another group of people turning out from the side corridor.

The young man amidst them was dressed in a princely robe with embroidered dragons. He was handsome and graceful, and his youthful features did not damper his dignity. Even from a distance, he stared up and down at Mei Changsu with curious eyes. He smiled immediately when he saw Mei Changsu looking back at him. His expression was extremely friendly, just like a younger brother meeting his new brother-in-law for the first time, which drew an amused yet helpless smile from Mei Changsu. Yet, when Mei Changsu saw the Princess grinning mischievously, he knew with certainty that this female general had done it purposefully.

“Mr. Su, you look great today,” said Princess Nihuang, strolling over. “Here, let me introduce you—this is my younger brother.”

“Greetings, Prince Mu.”

Mu Qing hastily reached out to support him. Usually, people call him the “little Prince Mu” due to his young age. Mei Changsu’s removal of the word “little” had made him very happy. Besides, this was the man his sister was fond of, so it wasn’t as if he dared to be arrogant in front of her. He was already brimming with smiles, “I’ve heard much about you, Mr. Su. You certainly do justice to your famed elegance.”

Mei Changsu gave a pained chuckle and said, "I am but a sickly man who dares not receive such praise."

"Oh? Prince Jing has arrived too?" said Princess Nihuang suddenly.

Mei Changsu turned around and saw Prince Jing, Xiao Jingyan, striding over. The two men met eyes briefly, then their gaze diverted.

"Thank you for allowing me to take up your precious time, Prince Jing," said Princess Nihuang with a smile. From her words, Prince Jing appeared to have arrived upon her invitation as well.

Mei Changsu looked at the two people standing shoulder to shoulder. The man was mighty and tall, with a valiant air of a mighty beast. The woman was noble and heroic, and possessed the air of a blazing phoenix. Mei Changsu's eyes glimmered involuntarily, and he felt his heart quiver.

Prince Jing was a man of few words. He only replied with a polite response, then stood silently.

"Do we need to wait for someone here?" inquired Mei Changsu.

"There's no need. Look, they're all here." Princess Nihuang smiled sweetly, "These two really act as one."

Mei Changsu knew who she was referring to without even needing to turn his head. Just as expected, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu's laughter rang in succession a moment later, as if they were competing in who can act more gracious and benevolent. They greeted the group at the corner of the hall pleasantly.

These two were royalty, so everyone stepped forward to greet them with bows. Prince Yu had made the Emperor very pleased by presenting the suggestion of challenge rounds a few days ago, so he was naturally very happy to see Mei Changsu. Although the Crown Prince was displeased, he knew that he could not place blame on Su Zhe for the situation. It was his fault for not having any eyes or

ears near him, so of course he had to show that he held no resentment. Mei Changsu made sure not to neglect Princess Nihuang and Mu Qing while chatting with the two Royal Princes. He performed gracefully in the intricate dance of conversation, and engaged all parties perfectly. Xiao Jingyan stood at the side and stared at the scene coldly, an expression of noticeable disgust in his eyes.

The people grouped up and entered the hall together. Wine and food were already laid out on banquet tables positioned inside the hall. Due to customs, the party could not take their seats as the Emperor had yet to arrive. So, they stood around in groups of two or three and chatted away.

Due to their rivalry, neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu wanted to give the other the chance to be alone with Mei Changsu, so the three were unexpectedly gathered together. Mu Qing had always looked up to Prince Jing's military feats, and also felt that men should discuss topics of might and blood, so he began to consult Xiao Jingyan on military affairs. Princess Nihuang wandered between, listening on this side for a bit and chatting with the other for awhile, ending up as the most relaxed of them all.

About a quarter of an hour later, a golden chime sounded softly outside the hall. A ceremonial official announced loudly, "The Emperor has arrived—"

The hall became silent at once. Everyone stood orderly according to customs, and Mei Changsu backed away into the corner. He waited for the figure in yellow robes to take a seat upon the main seat of the hall, then followed everyone in bowing down to the Emperor.

The Emperor of Liang was over sixty. Strands of white hair scattered at his temples, and his face was wrinkled. However, he still carried himself with a mighty air, without any hint of the frailty of old age. He ordered everyone to rise, then his gaze

automatically rested upon the figure furthest away, Mei Changsu.

To the revered Emperor, the Chief of the East River Alliance or the world's biggest sect were all distant affairs for him, far away from the grandeur of the Royal Court. The only reason he was interested in Mei Changsu was because he was under the same misunderstanding as Mu Qing and thought that he must be the one Princess Nihuang had secretly chosen.

With his first look, he found this person to be handsome and elegant, without any hint of nervousness in his actions. It's no wonder that the Princess was partial to him.

With his second look, he found his face to be overly pale and his figure under the fur cloak to be slight and thin. It's unlikely for him to enjoy longevity. He seemed a bit inadequate.

With his third look, he found his two eyes to be very serene. They were sort of clear and yet sort of complex. Even though they were silently downcast, as if meditating, they were full of spirit.

The Emperor of Liang smoothed his grey beard and nodded to himself. He called out, "Su Zhe."

"The commoner is present."

"The Princess has recommended you to me, saying that you are exceptionally talented. The Crown Prince and Prince Yu have also given you much praise. I have here with me three essays. Read them, and point out the superior one for me."

"The commoner obeys Your Majesty's command."

Mei Changsu received the essays from a eunuch and skimmed over it roughly, almost reading ten lines with one glance. He finished quickly and said, "Reporting to Your Majesty, An Essay on Central Governance is the finest."

"Oh? Why so?"

"This essay has the air of a sovereign. How can I dare to criticize

it as a mere commoner?”

The Emperor of Liang reared back with laughter. He looked very pleased, and praised Mei Changsu, “You really do have an eye for talent. I will entrust the Princess’s literary tournament to you. Although you do not have a position, you should still have the title of a Guest Official since you are working for the Royal Court. There is no need to refer to yourself as a commoner anymore.”

Mei Changsu pondered for a slight moment before saying, “The official obeys Your Majesty’s command.” These words were said in a very cool tone, as if he paid no mind to the Emperor’s benevolence and only acted to obey customs.

“Someone, present a seat for Mr. Su next to Princess Nihuang.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Mei Changsu bowed and entered his seat. The Princess shot a smile at him immediately, and an expression of “so that’s how it is” appeared on everyone in the hall.

At that time, the Commander of the Royal Guards, Meng Zhi, appeared at the entrance of the hall. He served directly under His Majesty and did require an announcement to enter the hall. He headed straight into the hall and reported, “Reporting to Your Majesty, the two envoys from the Yu and Yan empires as well as the ten final candidates have all arrived at the Royal Palace, and are waiting outside the hall for Your Majesty’s instructions.”

Mei Changsu had already heard the news that the goal of the banquet was not solely to see him. More importantly, it was held to study the candidates for the position of Prince Consort in advance. However, the news had not been confirmed until now, so he was rather happy for it to be true.

While he was pondering, the Emperor of Liang had already issued a summons. Meng Zhi received the command and turned around. In the brief moment of his gaze turning, he gave a slight

nod to Mei Changsu, unnoticed by all.

Mei Changsu relaxed slightly knowing that Meng Zhi had been successful, but his expression gave no hint of change while he sat serenely. A few moments later, a eunuch announced the arrival of Princess Jingning. The Emperor of Liang smiled happily and asked his little daughter as soon as she entered, “Ning, weren’t you whining yesterday about how you wanted to join the banquet? How come you’re late today?”

Princess Jingning’s delicate brows were knitted together, and a dark cloud hung over her face. Her expression was extremely gloomy. After she finished her greeting to the Emperor, she answered sullenly, “I saw a snow-white Persian cat on my way here and chased after it, and was thus delayed.”

“You really love cats, don’t you? Are you unhappy because you did not catch it?”

Princess Jingning pondered silently for a moment, then answered quietly, “No... I was chasing that cat, and accidentally went into the Secluded Courtyard. I saw the people there performing hard labour and looking very miserable, and thus felt a bit sorry...”

Prince Jing’s heart quivered upon hearing her mention the Secluded Courtyard, and threw a quick look at Mei Changsu. However, the latter was very calm, as if he never heard it at all.

The Emperor of Liang’s face darkened slightly. He said reprovingly, “How can you enter a place like that as a Princess? Besides, the people at the Secluded Courtyard have their crimes, and thus deserve the hardships of labour. You need not feel such compassion for them.”

“Yes, Father,” said Princess Jingning, hanging her head. “It’s just that there were also young children there, who were frail and pitiful. I was thinking, what kind of crime could they have committed at such a young age...”

“There’s no need to speak further!” bellowed the Emperor of Liang, cutting her off. “I’ve really spoiled you too much. Why are you bringing up those criminals during an occasion like this? Take your seat now. The envoys will arrive soon. You must always remember your status as a Princess. Look at Princess Nihuang, and how tactful she is with her noble bearing...”

“Your Majesty thinks too highly of me,” laughed Princess Nihuang immediately. “Jingning is a pampered little Princess. Your Majesty wouldn’t be able to bear it if she really were to fight on the battlefields like me.”

The Emperor of Liang’s eyes appeared very affectionate, and said, “I can’t bear to have you endure such hardships either. Now that Qing has inherited the title, I will be at ease after I choose a good husband for you.”

“I am infinitely grateful to Your Majesty’s kindness and benevolence. Even my father in the afterlife must feel the graciousness of Your Majesty and feel deeply indebted.” Princess Nihuang had governed over Yunnan for many years, and certainly did not build her success solely on bravery and might. Even a simple phrase of gratitude was transformed into such sincere and pleasant words by her.

The Emperor of Liang smiled warmly. At that time, the envoys from Yu and Yan had entered the hall. They took their seats after bowing to the Emperor. The ten final candidates entered after them. Each wore unique outfits, and some wore anxious expressions. Clearly, they had been spontaneously summoned early in the morning, and were not prepared in any way.

Compared to them, Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin who were used to entering the Palace were naturally a lot more relaxed. Their eyes searched around as soon as they entered the hall. Even though they did not dare to voice a greeting once they found Mei Changsu, they smiled at him in unison.

Chapter 23: Challenge

Everyone paid their gratitudes and took their seats. The Emperor of Liang ordered maids to fill each table with fragrant wine and favoured everyone with three cups. He waited until everyone drank their wine, then said, “This banquet is graced by the presence of gallant warriors and great fighters. Everyone here must be gallant gentlemen to be able to claim final victory. My intention for hosting today’s banquet is to honour your accomplishments and congratulate you. Heroes are great drinkers. Everyone may drink another cup.”

The ten candidates hastily raised their cups and stood up. They drained their cups.

The Emperor of Liang then turned towards the two Head Ambassadors at the guest table and said, “The Yan and Yu empires are truly birthplaces for gallant heroes. These young heroes have travelled from afar, and are all exceptionally skilled. However, I fear that I am not well acquainted with them. I would be glad if you could introduce them to me.”

The two ambassadors hastily stood up and bowed, saying “Yes, Your Majesty!” Yet, just as they straightened up and were about to speak, they discovered a problem. The two empires both have representing candidates in the final champions. However, the Emperor of Liang had only said to “introduce them”, and never specified who should introduce first and who should introduce after. Honestly speaking, who spoke first and who spoke second was not such a big deal, but everyone needed to try to come out on top during such a grand banquet. Besides, the Yan and Yu were not some friendly neighbouring empires. Disputes and quarrels were frequent between them, so neither party wanted to yield ground for no reason.

After a momentary lapse, the two head ambassadors realized that this deadlock needed a solution. Together, they turned their eyes

towards the host. They found the old Emperor to be wearing an unkind smile. He clearly wanted them to resolve this issue of sequence amongst themselves.

“There are two warriors from our Yu empire within final candidates...” began the Head Ambassador of Yu immediately, implying that we have two and you guys only have one, so we should speak first.

“It’s unfortunate that these ten candidates do not have an opportunity to compete further amongst themselves. Our warrior Baili is still eager for more,” said the Head Ambassador of Yan, unwilling to concede. His words implied that both of yours together can’t compare with the one of ours, so why should you speak first.

“Actually, there are many other brave warriors within our empire who are able to compete. However, considering that this is to request the Princess’s hand in marriage, the candidate should possess both good looks and talent. Thus, we made a careful selection beforehand.” The eyes of the head ambassador of Yu were filled with disdain, clearly mocking Baili Qi for his ugly looks, which the Princess will definitely find disdainful.

“All that glitters is not gold. It is better to judge people by their character rather than their appearance. Such a remarkable person as the Princess would never give her attention to people who are merely useless ornaments...” retorted the Head Ambassador of Yan, who had an equally sharp tongue.

The Emperor of Liang finally gave a laugh and mediated, “Our three empires are friends today, which should be a joyous affair. Let’s not bury our head in the details. Please take a seat, ambassadors. Let’s have Meng Zhi take over the duty of introductions.”

Meng Zhi shot out immediately. After a “Yes, Your Majesty”, he turned back went next to candidate from the Yu empire first. He

indicated the man politely with his palm and said, “This warrior from the Yu empire is named You Guangzhi¹, age twenty-eight. His father is a Second Rank Official within the Central Records. He had once been engaged with a Ms. Hu, which had been cancelled three months ago.” Following that, he went next to the Yan table and said, “This warrior from the Yan empire is named Baili Qi, age thirty. He is a soldier serving under the Fourth Prince of Yan. Apart from this tournament, he had never left the side of His Highness. He had never been married.” After that, he returned back to the side of Yu and said, “This warrior from the Yu empire is named Zheng Cheng, age twenty-seven. He is the brother-in-law to the Second Prince of Yu. He had once been married to a lady with the surname Zeng², who he expelled half a year ago under the crime of malicious language.”

The Emperor of Liang listened quietly. “Mhmm.”

The Yu ambassador didn’t expect for Liang to actually investigate the backgrounds of these candidates so thoroughly, and was rather unnerved. He rushed to explain, “Your Majesty, these two are both outstanding young men of my empire, in possession of both good looks and character. Any previous engagements have absolutely been properly resolved. We dare not mistreat the Princess.”

The Yan ambassador chuckled coldly, “They’ve really been resolved in time!”

“It’s still better than your esteemed empire sending over a servant. Don’t you know that this is to request the Princess’s hand in marriage?” retorted the Head Ambassador of Yu angrily.

“The Princess is marrying a person, not his family background. Besides, with the Princess’s honourable status, why would she need to mind something like someone’s family background?”

“There had always been a distinction between the noble and the common since ancient times. How can it be ignored?”

“Our warrior Baili had become sworn brothers with the Fourth Prince prior to leaving. The noble and common change with the tides of time and fate.”

“You...” The Yu ambassador was about to retort, but someone by his side tugged his sleeves discreetly and said quietly, “There is already a process in place for how the Princess will choose her husband. There is no benefit in this quarrel.”

The Head Ambassador of Yu wasn't dumb either. He comprehended immediately with the slight reminder. Besides, the person who spoke to stop him was his Vice Ambassador, the famous martial artist on the Langya Ranking, Jindiao Chaiming. How could he ignore him? He gave a “Humph!” and sat down.

The Emperor of Liang watched their quarrel with cold eyes. He remained silent until both sides momentarily doused their fire, then said slowly, “Everyone here is exceptional. There is no need for a quarrel. Unfortunately, I have been busy with government affairs and have not been able to see every match. I'm afraid that I'm still rather unfamiliar with these warriors.”

“I have a suggestion, Father.” Prince Yu had a quick wit by nature, and with the addition of his speedy information gathering, he already knew the intention of his royal father's. He jumped on the opportunity and said, “Why don't we take advantage of the banquet today and have these ten warriors spar with each other? It would make for a great tale.”

The Emperor of Liang made a soft sound of approval. He brushed his beard and asked, “What is the opinion of everyone else?”

“Father, I believe that this suggestion by Prince Yu is rather lacking in consideration,” responded the Crown Prince hurriedly. “Your Majesty's royal figure is here. How can we allow knives and swords in the hall? If they somehow...” At that part in his speech, he suddenly saw something at the corner of his eyes. Mei Changsu had raised his cup and was gazing at it, all the while shaking his

head gently. The Crown Prince's heart gave a thump, and he immediately changed his speech, "These are merely some concerns I hold for Father... But now that I think about it, I remember Father's heroics that year while quelling the rebellion. Plus, we have Commander Meng standing guard, so there shouldn't be any major issues. Hence, I have a suggestion, Father. Sparring is fine, but everyone must hold back in their attacks, as it is inauspicious to see blood."

He changed his tone halfway through, which rather showed some quick wit. Prince Yu did not see Mei Changsu's hint, so he didn't understand how this person suddenly wised up. He was a bit disappointed, and gave a cold "Hmph!".

"Both of my sons' suggestions please me greatly," chuckled the Emperor of Liang. "Then, everyone may challenge any other candidates at their will. There is no need to set any rules."

His words clearly exposed that he really did want to see everyone spar. The Crown Prince silently lamented over the danger he avoided, and couldn't help but send a grateful look at Mei Changsu. However, the latter was leaning over and listening to Princess Nihuang's whispers, and didn't see him at all.

Even though everyone was allowed to freely challenge others, everyone there had endured thousands of hardships to earn their positions. Plus, nobody wanted to rashly challenge someone in front of the Princess, in fear of making a fool out of themselves rather than earning prestige. For a time, everyone tried to measure each other out, and there was an awkward stillness.

"I'll go first, then." The person who gave a long laugh and stood up, clothes rustling, was of course the carefree Yan Yujin. He walked to the middle of the hall and bowed to the Emperor, then turned around leisurely and tilted his chin up, "I, Yan Yujin, would like to challenge the young master Mr. Xiao."

Xiao Jingrui looked at him with a pained yet amused smile, but

he had no choice but to stand up. Quite a few people in the hall couldn't help but chuckle while they watched the two stand face to face and hug their fists in greeting. These two rascals had scuffled with each other since their childhood, and had left teeth marks on each other's little cheeks before they could even walk. However, nobody had actually seen them in a proper duel.

Just as everyone watched the match begin with eyes filled with expectancy, they couldn't resist an internal "Psh" after a few moves. How was that an important duel? It was clearly a performance competition. Never mind Xiao Jingrui, who was acting properly as usual. However, Yan Yujin was dead set on showing off. He performed all of his coolest and prettiest moves, and fluttered around the hall like a colourful butterfly. Sometimes, when Xiao Jingrui's attack would accidentally block the move he was about to display, he would even glare at him. During all that hassle, he didn't forget to choose the best angle to give charming smiles at the Princess. It made Princess Nihuang bowl over in laughter. She waved her hand while trying to catch her breath and said, "Little...little Jin... Enough, enough... I know...you've always been the most handsome..."

After that opening, the atmosphere was, as expected, immediately relaxed to the extreme. Soon after, people began to challenge others one after the other. For a time, there was an unending stream of spectacular matches. Everybody was certainly spectacularly skilled, each with their strengths.

About four or five rounds later, the biggest dark horse Baili Qi finally stood up. He hugged his fists at a Liang candidate who had already won one round, but who had also rested for a round as well. During such an occasion, it was impossible to hesitate. The opponent stood up immediately and came forward.

"This person isn't from the capital. Do you know him?" asked Yan Yujin, leaning in his good friend's ear.

"Li Xiao is the most outstanding disciple in the current

generation of the Wudang Sect³. My Zhuo dad often has high praises for him. His inner energy has is very solid with great foundation. He could actually be considered an opponent for Baili Qi,” answered Xiao Jingrui quietly.

While the two were whispering amongst themselves, the duel had already begun. The Wudang Sect had great martial artists from every generation. Its inner energy mantra and combat techniques naturally had their superior aspects. Li Xiao was very appropriate in his attacks and defences against a great fighter like Baili Qi. Every move and every technique was filled with power. In the blink of an eye, dozens of moves have been exchanged, and he actually showed no sign of defeat.

Still, just when everyone was exclaiming over a spectacular move from Li Xiao called “Win Some Lose Some”, Princess Nihuang suddenly sucked in her breath. At the same time, Meng Zhi summoned his inner energy and shouted loudly, “No!” Before the remnants of his voice faded away, Li Xiao’s body had already flown out. Meng Zhi darted out and caught him, then supported him to sit on the ground. When Meng Zhi looked at Li Xiao again, the young man’s forehead was filled with cold sweat, and his face was ashen. Meng Zhi held his limp right arm for an inspection, then his brows locked together. The young man was luckily shielded when Meng Zhi shouted with 10% of his inner energy, which prevented Baili Qi from shattering all of the energy channels in his arm. However, the bone was broken, and the major tendon was severely damaged. The young man had gritted his teeth and did not make any sounds. Still, one can see from his sorrowful eyes that he understood that with his injury, it would be almost impossible to advance his martial arts further hereafter.

“This is the Fracture Restoration Balm made by Dr. Xun. Use it for three consecutive days, then refrain from using power for half a month, and you will be able to make a perfect recovery.” Mei Changsu had circled around quietly at some point. He shoved a box

of balm into Li Xiao's pocket and continued softly, "You need to believe in Dr. Xun. Don't worry and rest well. You will not have any lingering problems."

Dr. Xun's Fracture Restoration Balm was an incredible medicine that one can seldom chance upon, and some unfamiliar young man actually gifted a whole box of it to himself. Li Xiao was so startled and thankful that he forgot all about his pain. He stared dumbly at Mei Changsu, unable to speak.

Meng Zhi gave a slight nod to Mei Changsu and summoned servants to carry Li Xiao off. At that time, Baili Qi had already returned to his seat. He looked on with indifference, as if his destructive move just now wasn't anything much.

"Mr. Ambassador," started the Crown Prince angrily, "Everyone had decided to spar in goodwill. How could your fighter be so cruel? It's too much!" He felt really humiliated as he had just suggested for the candidates to hold back in their attacks, and was the first to speak.

The other candidates shot over angry looks as well. The Head Ambassador of Yan stood up and said haughtily, "We did obey the Crown Prince's orders and did not show blood. Besides, it is impossible to avoid injury in competitions of strength. It is well-known that our empire has always respected the strong. The Princess is a courageous lady of the military and should know that the word "kindness" does not exist on the battlefield. What wrongs has our warrior Baili committed?"

The Emperor of Liang said with apparent displeasure, "The Royal Court is not the battlefield. Your warrior has been rash. It must not be repeated."

Even though he said that, it was a duel after all. The Emperor of Liang couldn't exactly get angry and administer punishment, thereby allowing for criticism in the future. Thus, he could reprimand him a little. After the other party respectfully agreed,

he let it pass and did not mention it further.

Still, from the subsequent cold smile of the Yan ambassador, everyone discovered that Baili Qi's objective was nothing using this opportunity to display his combat abilities. He went on to challenge seven opponents, two of which were from Yu. He did not use any more cruel moves like breaking bones, but he still gave his opponents quite a few hidden injuries. In the end, he only left Yan Yujin and Xiao Jingrui alone, ignoring them completely. Who knows if it was because he thought too little of them, or if it was because he thought too highly of them?

Notes:

[1\]](#) Fun fact: His name means “well-travelled”

[2\]](#) Fun fact: The character of her surname can also be read as “ceng”, which means means “once”, e.g. “they were married once, but not anymore”.

[3\]](#) A fictional sect with some historical roots, popular in Chinese wuxia stories. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wudang_Sect.

Chapter 24: Provoking The Enemy Envoy With Wit

After claiming another victory, Baili Qi returned to his seat and showed no intention of standing up again. Xiao Jingrui took this into his eyes and stood up with a grave expression. He hugged his fists coldly towards Baili Qi and announced, “I, Xiao Jingrui, request a match with the Warrior Baili.”

It was the first time for Baili Qi to be challenged that day. A light flickered in his eyes, and he turned around to look at his empire’s ambassador. When he saw the ambassador shake his head at him, Baili Qi’s expression immediately turned nonchalant. He shook his head in refusal and said, “I’m tired.”

Xiao Jingrui knew that his name would easily make others mistake him for a Prince of Liang, and suspected that to be the reason for Baili Qi to refuse his challenge. He added hurriedly, “I am the son of the Marquess of Ning, Xie Yu, here to seek guidance. If Warrior Baili feels tired, then please instruct me after you have rested for awhile.”

Baili Qi turned around again and saw the ambassador of Yan shaking his head still. “No more fighting today,” said Baili Qi.

Actually, it was widely known that Xiao Jingrui was not a competitive person. For something like a martial arts duel, he always believed that there was no need to make enemies regardless of victory or defeat. However, Baili Qi’s actions that day really went over the line. Sometimes, his opponent would have clearly backed off in defeat, but he still insisted on chasing after them to strike them down completely. It roused the anger of the even-tempered young man, making his blood rush so much as to actually initiate a challenge. Xiao Jingrui had gathered up his courage, resolving to repress the audacity of Baili Qi somewhat even if he had to bear heavy injuries. He never thought that he

would be so coolly turned away right from the start. It just so happened that the man did indeed fight in many consecutive rounds as well. With Xiao Jingrui's kind nature, he was seriously incapable of saying something like "you're feinting tiredness to avoid fighting". He was frozen in anger for awhile. Finally, he said, "Then Warrior Baili, please schedule a time with me. Let us battle another day."

Baili Qi drank some tea and shook his head for the third time. He responded coldly, "Is there any reason to battle in another day? There are so many people here. If you really want to fight, then why don't you pick someone else?"

Seeing him so insistent on refusing Xiao Jingrui, the Emperor of Liang became a bit excited. He turned his head and shot a look at Meng Zhi, and the Commander of the Royal Guards understood his thoughts immediately. He quickly leaned over and spoke by the Emperor's ear, "Please do not misunderstand, Your Majesty. The Yan are not being submissive. They must know that Jingrui and Yujin are of noble status, and the two clearly seemed to be friendly with the Princess just now. The Yan only wish to avoid angering the higher powers of Liang too much. In actuality, Jingrui is not a match for Baili Qi."

The Emperor of Liang's expression remained unchanged upon hearing this, but he was inevitably a bit disappointed. Baili Qi had been so cocky today. As the ruler of Liang, he naturally hoped for a citizen of Liang to win back some honour. Unfortunately, it did not seem like his hopes would come true. Just as he was feeling rather down, he suddenly saw Mei Changsu whispering with the Princess at their table. Nihuang's face was full of astonishment after hearing something. The Emperor couldn't resist and asked, "Nihuang, what are you discussing with Mr. Su?"

Princess Nihuang paused for a moment and forced a smile, "Nothing much..."

The Emperor of Liang dipped his brows slightly with displeasure.

He said gravely, “Don’t you lie to your liege, now. What were you discussing?”

Princess Nihuang gave a smile, “Of course I dare not. Mr. Su was only giving a few comments on the duel just now. There really was nothing else.”

“Oh? What observations do you have, Mr. Su? Please share them with us.”

Princess Nihuang glanced at Mei Changsu and saw him looking very reluctant. She had no choice but to stand up and say, “Mr. Su said that Warrior Baili’s power is overly hard but brittle, thus more liable to break. His path in martial arts is incorrect. If someone were to identify his flaws, he can be struck down with just a few children.”

The muscles on Baili Qi’s face twitched upon hearing such a comment, and some anger rose. However, the Yan ambassador took these words merely as the Liang attempting to regain their honour and responded arrogantly, “Those words could be applied to anyone. If you are capable, Mr. Su, why don’t you attempt to identify his flaws, then find some children to strike him down?”

Mei Changsu replied hastily with a smile, “I spoke imprudently. Please rest assured. It mustn’t have been easy for Warrior Baili to achieve such skills. I would never destroy someone’s future prospects so carelessly.”

He was evidently apologizing, but his words stung more than a provocation. His words plainly implied, “I can actually put my money where my mouth is, but I don’t want to destroy you.” The Yan ambassador had been feeling very pleased with their accomplishments and naturally did not take it well. He retorted, “If this gentleman has such abilities, then please try it before His Majesty. Our Warrior Baili is fatigued, but we dare not ruin Mr. Su’s good mood and keen interest in boasting.”

“Oh, it couldn’t be done so quickly,” said Mei Changsu, still

wearing his warm smile. “Even if I were able to find some children immediately, I still need to train them for a few days at the very least. All right, let’s just say that my words were nonsense. Please do not take it to heart...”

To the Yan ambassador, Mei Changsu’s words sounded more and more like he was stating a fact. If he were to simply ignore Mei Changsu now, it would seem as if he was afraid of him. How could he leave things be, and allow the honour earned by Baili Qi’s fists to be taken away by someone’s clever tongue? If the Fourth Prince learns about this in the future, he would surely blame the Head Ambassador for being useless. Of course he had to make a retort. The Yan ambassador chuckled coldly and said, “If Mr. Su needs to train people, then we will wait. Please appoint a day, Your Majesty. We promise to show up whenever we are summoned.”

Mei Changsu looked like he was in somewhat of a predicament. He mumbled, “I’m not very familiar with the capital. Where would I be able to find these children...”

Find some children? If he makes a request, every single Liang citizen present would be able to find him a whole crowd immediately. However, nobody could figure out if he was actually speaking the truth or if he simply wanted to upset Baili Qi, so nobody dared to speak up.

Seeing this, the Yan ambassador was even more certain that Mei Changsu was bluffing. He immediately added fuel to the fire, “Where’s the difficulty in that? I’ve heard that there are many young disciples in the martial art studios of your royal capital...”

“The children in the martial art studios are too strong. I’m afraid that Warrior Baili may face a disadvantage. Besides, it would not be fair to have children who had already practised martial arts gang up on him.”

This person still insists on boasting even when pushed so far! The Yan ambassador gritted his teeth in anger, “No harm. We do not

have any complaints.”

“That’s no good,” said Mei Changsu, shaking his head. “I need to find some weaker ones... Are there any weaker children in the Royal Palace, or in the households of everyone here?”

Everyone was very cautious. They did not dare to answer, fearing they would accidentally do Mei Changsu a disservice. Princess Jingning was the only one who did not really understand the situation. Plus, she had just recently been startled by the desolate circumstances within the Secluded Courtyard, so she answered immediately, “Yes, in the Palace. There are a bunch of little kids in the Secluded Courtyard. They’re all sticks and bones, and so pitiful.”

“The convicted servants within the Secluded Courtyard, huh,” said Mei Changsu quietly to himself. “They are rather more suitable than normal children, but would Your Majesty permit it...?”

The Emperor of Liang saw his gaze turn towards himself. He couldn’t really be certain if Mei Changsu wanted him to allow it or not. Just as he was hesitating, Meng Zhi’s voice whispered in his year, “Please give your permission, Your Majesty.”

The Emperor of Liang had absolute trust in this empire’s greatest warrior on the topics of martial arts. He immediately responded with, “I give my permission. Someone, go to the Secluded Courtyard and pick a few children to bring here.”

“Remember to choose some weaker ones!” added Mei Changsu.

The Yan ambassador was furious. He said fiercely, “The convicted servants are people as well. You must have a heart of steel, Mr. Su, to send these children to their deaths.”

Princess Jingning had become very anxious when she saw the results of her off-handed remark. She jumped in to reply, “That’s right! Isn’t this sending those children to their deaths? Father, this

can't be okay!"

"Please rest assured, Princess. I do have some confidence," soothed Mei Changsu. "What's more, as convicted servants, they ought to serve His Majesty even if it ends in their death. Not to mention that if they were to win, His Majesty would bestow them with great rewards."

Princess Jingning became even more upset hearing that, "They labour in the Palace every day. Regardless of how much money they are bestowed, they have no place to spend it. Their lives are more important, of course!"

"That's true," said Mei Changsu. He looked up and pondered for a moment, "These little convicted servants have no hope in their hearts. I suppose they would be rather lazy and hard to train. This was a bad idea, I shouldn't have chosen them..."

The Yan ambassador was initially rather surprised when he saw them going off to pick people, and immediately calmed again when he saw Mei Changsu showing signs of retreating. He jeered, "You're really stubborn, Mr. Su, refusing to give up on your boasting even now. Actually, you only need to make an apology. Our Warrior Baili is a very forgiving person."

Mei Changsu stared at him with a steady gaze, until the Yan ambassador was beginning to look a bit uncomfortable. Then, he gave a sigh and said, "I have given you a chance to back down again and again, but you've refused to do so. If you insist on trying, then I have no choice but to be uncivil towards Warrior Baili."

The Yan ambassador was furious. He was just about to retort, but the eunuch who was sent to the Secluded Courtyard had returned just then and reported, "Your Majesty, I have brought five children here."

"Good. Tell them to come forward."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Five little figures followed behind the eunuch, cowering as they walked into the Hall. They curled up into balls as they bowed on the ground.

Prince Jing had already been feeling suspicious. He pretty much understood the situation after seeing Tingsheng in their midst. As he saw everyone's attentions gathered on the children, he quickly found an opportunity and whispered a few words to his sister Jingning next to him.

"Raise your heads. Report your ages. Which guilty officials are you the descendants of?" asked the Emperor of Liang coldly.

The five children were all scared out of their wits. Urged and threatened by the eunuch, they finally responded one by one, brokenly and with shaking voices. When it was Tingsheng's turn, he said quietly with a pale face, "I am e-eleven. T-he grandson of... t-the former Grand Secretary of the Hall of...S-Supreme Harmony...who was found g-guilty in...the corruption c-case of the Royal Examinations..."

Mei Changsu suddenly felt his heart clench, and immediately raised his teacup for a drink to cover it up. Thinking back about it now, the women in the household of Prince Qi were really worthy of awe and respect. While they were confined in the Secluded Courtyard, and without any assistance from the outside world, the women managed to cooperate and scheme a fake identity for Tingsheng, the posthumous child born through luck. They protected him and allowed him to escape elimination from the Crown Prince and Prince Yu. Unfortunately, these courageous women had suffered extreme torment, and not many were still among the living.

The five children finished their responses. The Emperor of Liang didn't really take it to heart. He made a sound of approval, then asked Mei Changsu, "Do you think these children are usable, Mr. Su?"

“Five is too many. We cannot take advantage of Warrior Baili too much. Three is more than enough.” Mei Changsu glanced at the children carelessly and pointed at three people including Tingsheng. “I’m afraid that I would need to take them home with me to train them for two days. Can Your Majesty permit it?”

“I permit it. I will grant great rewards if there is a victory in two days.”

Mei Changsu sighed, “Your Majesty is benevolent, but the Princess was right just now. These children are all convicted servants. They would have no place to use any silver or gold bestowed upon them.”

The Emperor of Liang chuckled and said, “You misunderstand. My intent was to grant great rewards to you.”

“Eh?” Mei Changsu looked confused, “There would be no need to reward me. They are the ones who will be working hard. Please reward them with something they can enjoy instead, Your Majesty.”

“Of course they shall be rewarded as well.” The Emperor of Liang saw the Yan ambassador turning red with anger while listening to this exchange, and was very pleased. “If they win, I will reward them with...err...with...”

He was trying to thinking of what the reward should be when Princess Jingning interrupted and said, “Father, you need to promise a great reward to make them willing to work their hardest, and to make it easier for Mr. Su to train them. In my opinion, the biggest reward to these convicted servants would be to release them from hard labour and allow them to leave the Secluded Courtyard to find another station in life. Even if you were to reward them with a mountain made of gold or silver, Father, it’s not as good as that.”

The Emperor of Liang saw that his little daughter was feeling really sympathetic towards the little convicted servants today. In

order to make her happy—plus, those children weren't really important—he nodded without much thought and agreed. “All right. It will be as you wish. If they achieve a victory, I will permit them to be released from hard labour and have the Royal Household Department find them appropriate stations.”

Princess Jingning was ecstatic. “Thank you, Father! I just know that Father is most gracious and benevolent.”

“Oh you, you're so soft-hearted. Although, it's not bad for girls to be soft-hearted.” The Emperor of Liang looked at her lovingly, then turned towards everyone in the Hall. “Let us adjourn for today. Before the Princess's literary tournament in two days, let us all witness the results of Mr. Su's training before starting the battle of ink and brushes.”

Everyone stood up immediately and said as one, “Yes, Your Majesty.

Chapter 25: Training Children

The Emperor of Liang rose, supported by the hand of a eunuch, and returned to the Inner Palace. Everybody within the hall stood respectfully until the Emperor was gone, then scattered one by one. The Crown Prince and Prince Yu both rushed over, wanting to inquire after the authenticity of Mei Changsu's startling proclamations. Prince Jing was the only one to leave quietly by himself.

Mei Changsu showed admiration in his eyes. As if he couldn't help it, he praised, "I never imagined that Prince Jing would have such composure. He does not speak nor act more than he should, and I've never seen him lose his calm under any circumstance. He really has the grace of a Royal Prince."

So that's the type the qilin prodigy likes. Hearing his words, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu swallowed back their torrent of questions and greeted Mei Changsu nonchalantly, then walked out with "composure" as well.

A few words from Mei Changsu got rid of two Royal Princes. He turned around and immediately saw Princess Nihuang nodding at him while barely suppressing her laughter, a face full of admiration. He returned a helpless smile.

At that time, Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin walked over, Xiao Jingrui holding the hand of Tingsheng and Yan Yujin holding the hands of the other two children. The Empress's nephew began asking when he was still a few steps away, "Su, are you sure about this? We've confirmed it just now—these three children really don't know any martial arts."

"That's okay, who knows martial arts as soon as they're born? Jingrui, I need to trouble you to notify the Marquess that these three children will be staying at the Snow Cottage as well."

"That won't be a problem." Xiao Jingrui grasped Mei Changsu's

arm with concern, “But Su, let me challenge him first in two days. I feel that...”

“All right now,” Mei Changsu patted his hand assuringly, “Don’t worry. Although I cannot practise martial arts myself, I can still train people.”

“If Su says he can do it, then he’ll definitely be able to do it. You should stop frowning so much.” Yan Yujin chuckled, “You’re not as handsome as me normally, and you’re even less handsome when you frown.”

Everyone laughed together, and their mood lightened. Still, the three children hung their heads and cowered back, looking very anxious. Mei Changsu knew that it would be impossible for them to completely relax so quickly, so he did not rush to talk with them. He only made a slight gesture for the three to follow him, and walked with the Princess until they’ve exited the Royal Palace. Nihuang saw that her younger brother, who had left first, was already standing dutifully waiting for her. Mei Changsu was with friends, so he probably wouldn’t need the Mu carriage to send him back. Hence, she did not stay behind, and left after saying her farewells. The carriages of the Marquess of Ning and the Yan households were both driven over just then. Mei Changsu brought the children into the carriage with him. He still did not make any inquiries during their ride, and only lifted the curtains for the children to see the scenery of the streets outside. Xiao Jingrui, who was riding in the same carriage, gazed at Tingsheng’s profile and thought back to when he first met the boy. He gradually began to understand, and turned around involuntarily to give Mei Changsu a look.

Facing this pair of inquiring eyes, the Chief of the East River Alliance gave a light smile and nodded.

Even though Mei Changsu had solemnly promised that he would train these three children in earnest, everyone who came to check on the situation in the next two days discovered that he was

actually extremely leisurely and at ease. Besides drawing some strange lines on the ground in the courtyard and instructing the children to practise stepping on them, he lounged on the long chair beneath the tree almost all day long. The person who was working hard, what with demonstrating movements and jumping around, was actually Feiliu.

Even still, all visitors were only allowed to take a few glances at the entrance of the courtyard before they were rushed out due to “necessary confidentiality of secret techniques”. This added a feeling of mystery around the whole training process. Only Xiao Jingrui was a bit special, and was reluctantly allowed to come in to sit for a bit.

Still, as time went on, people began to have some different opinions. The next night, when the young master Mr. Xiao entered the Snow Cottage again to visit and inquire for the others, he found with surprise that the children’s speed had clearly increased exponentially.

“They’ve only really practised for a day and a half since yesterday afternoon, and yet they’ve improved so quickly. I must focus in order to see their movements clearly now!”

“Even though these children are thin and frail, their perseverance, willpower, and concentration surpass regular adults by far. They should not be underestimated.” Mei Changsu used hand signals to direct Feiliu in correcting the trainees’ footwork, and continued casually, “But regardless of how great their aptitudes are, it’s still impossible for them to practise anything substantial within two days.”

“What?” exclaimed Xiao Jingrui, astonished, “Then you mean...”

“Hey, don’t worry,” said Mei Changsu with a slight smile. “Of course it’s rather crazy to rely only on these children to strike down Baili Qi. This set of footwork and the complimenting sword formation are really the only two things that can genuinely

produce an outcome.”

“But... But...” Xiao Jingrui became even more anxious, “But regardless of how excellent the teamwork and footwork, it’s impossible to execute its effectiveness without the corresponding physical power! Baili Qi possesses very solid inner energy. Even if he were to stand still and take a few hits, these children would be able to make a scratch on him.”

“Jingrui,” Mei Changsu looked at him with warm eyes, “You’ve practised martial arts for many years. Don’t you know what using your opponent’s power against them is?”

“Using your opponent’s power against them requires hand techniques to guide its intricacies. These children don’t know any combat techniques at all!”

“They won’t be able to master hand techniques right now of course, but you’ll learn about its profundity once you see the synergy of this set of sword techniques. Besides, the stronger and harder Baili Qi is, the more delicate and brittle his weak point will be. I already know where his Achilles’ heel is, else I wouldn’t dare to make such grand statements before the Emperor. What, you don’t believe in me?”

Xiao Jingrui froze for a bit, then said hastily, “Of course I do. I dare not make little of Su’s vast knowledge. I’m only worried that if...”

“Don’t worry. Even though this is fun, I wouldn’t play along if there’s really a risk.” Mei Changsu continued lightly, “If you delay me a little more, my assurance will drop a little too.”

Xiao Jingrui panicked and said immediately, “Continue with your work, Su. I’m leaving right now.” He backed out of the courtyard right after he finished.

Mei Changsu watched his figure disappear into the distance. Only then did a strange expression flash in his eyes. He mumbled to

himself, “As expected, it’s hard to deceive an honest child... Is because you are steadfast and avoid shortcuts? You know that the more embellished and profound a thing appears, the more unreliable it actually is.”

Feiliu heard him speak and immediately shot over. He stared at Mei Changsu with big eyes.

“No no, I wasn’t talking with our Feiliu.” Mei Changsu smiled warmly and smoothed the youth’s hair. “Feiliu has worked hard. They still need to be even more familiar with their training. They need to be able to dazzle everyone’s eyes. Only then will Su be able to fool everyone.”

“Too slow! Fast!” Feiliu nodded firmly.

“That’s right,” encouraged Mei Changsu, “They’re too slow now. They need to be faster.”

Feiliu turned away immediately and focused on his task of training the three children’s movements. Mei Changsu relaxed his waist and leaned back. His gaze was still directed at the courtyard, but his mind had begun to wander off. After some unknown time had passed, he was roused by a word from Feiliu.

“Uncle!” exclaimed Feiliu angrily, standing in the middle of the courtyard. Because of his sudden halt, the three children remained in their places, afraid to move. None of them knew what was going on, and stood frozen.

Mei Changsu had just regained his bearings, and it actually took a while before he understood Feiliu’s meaning. He then quickly said, “You’ve already practised for so long today. It’s rather late. Feiliu, bring your little brothers to the west bedroom to sleep and don’t come out again, okay?”

“Sleep?”

“Yes, sleep. You have to wake up early tomorrow to practise. There’s a good child.”

Feiliu looked at the main room, then tilted his head to ponder for a moment. It seemed that being a good child was more important, so he took his three little disciples into the west bedroom and quickly closed the door and windows.

Mei Changsu stood up slowly and entered the main room where he usually resided. Just as Feiliu had said, Meng Zhi was already sitting at the table. He stood up immediately when he saw Mei Changsu enter.

“I’m a bit tired today. Help me close the window, Meng.” While Mei Changsu ordered the greatest warrior of Liang around, he climbed straight onto his warm bed and covered himself with a thick fur rug.

“Aren’t you relaxed.” Meng Zhi closed the window, then turned back and sat at the edge of the bed. He stared at Mei Changsu with seriousness, “Tell me the truth. What exactly do you want to do?”

“What are you asking about, Meng?”

“Don’t play dumb with me! I’m asking about the task you roped in yesterday. Although I’ve been cooperating with you the whole time, I’ve also observed Baili Qi’s abilities very carefully. It’s no doubt that being overly hard and thus easily breakable is his weakness, but not even you should be able to make three children strike him down.”

“You don’t believe it, Meng?” Mei Changsu gave a distant smile, “Just one more day, and the result will show. See for yourself then.”

Meng Zhi’s gaze bore into Mei Changsu’s face like red-hot coal. Finally, he let out a long breath, and his tense shoulders relaxed. He said in a low voice, “Just as I thought. Baili Qi is your subordinate...”

Mei Changsu rubbed his icy hands together. He raised them to his mouth and breathed on them. “Wrong guess. Baili Qi is not my

subordinate. However, the person you see now is not the real Baili Qi, that's all."

"What's going on here?"

"If I want to be tousling the clouds here in the royal capital in order to reach my objective, I need to first become an important person, of course. No matter how highly the Crown Prince and Prince Yu think of me, it can't be compared to the appreciation of His Majesty the Emperor himself. So, the original intention for laying the groundwork of this plan was to put myself in the limelight and gain fame." Mei Changsu's eyes turned towards the west window, as if he wanted to see the little child in the west bedroom beyond the paper window. "Today, the plan is slightly altered for Tingsheng. It actually feels better and more natural. I suppose the heavens are aiding me."

"From the sounds of it, you guys have already kidnapped the real Baili Qi while the Yan envoys were passing through the East River Alliance's jurisdiction, and then you replaced him with an imposter?"

"Yes. Actually, regardless of how excellent the disguise, there will inevitably be flaws as time goes by. Only, Baili Qi had always remained within the Prince's manor and was not seen often by others. He also possesses a rude temperament and an ugly appearance, so none of the envoys want to look at him closely. In addition, the person disguised as him is very detailed and careful, so no flaws have been shown over these days."

"Then then Yan's strategy this time to first keep a low profile and then show off..."

"That was the decision they made before they had departed, to first have Baili Qi hide his abilities and then make a sudden show of an astonishing warrior. Our man simply went with the flow and acted in complete accordance with their plan, thus avoiding suspicion." Mei Changsu continued airily, "I was just talking about

using your opponent's force against them with someone. If the opponent remains completely still, it'll actually be harder for us to make a move."

Meng Zhi nodded thoughtfully, already grasping most of the situation. What he had observed was the rudimentary steps in training. In combination with his skills in martial arts, he can, of course, see immediately that the set of footwork and sword technique have rather low damage. Yet at the same time, they have a very apparent ability once they are fully learned—the ability to create errors and chaos in one's vision. Once someone's body movements and attack process are unable to be seen clearly, almost everyone will instinctively believe that it must be a style of exceedingly superb martial arts with astonishing damage. What the three children need to do then is to render people incapable of seeing their movements and attacks clearly. That way, when Baili Qi falls down, everyone will think that he had been struck down by the martial arts that was spectacular to the point of unidentifiable.

"It's still rather dangerous to have the children fight. Jindiao Chaiming and the Princess are top tier fighters. Their observation skills can't be bad. However, for Tingsheng, I suppose this is the only way." Meng Zhi sighed, "I'll come take a look again tomorrow night. It'll be great if they are well-versed in their movements. If there are still flaws, we'll need to think of something else."

"Then I'll thank you in advance." Mei Changsu smiled and breathed on his fingers for the second time.

"Are you still cold even with the fur rug?" Meng Zhi took Mei Changsu's hands into his own, and discovered them to be freezing cold. He massaged them to warm them up, and his heart clenched, "It's not even winter solstice yet and you're already like this... You were never afraid of the cold before. I've even heard Prince Jing joke about that before, saying the young commander of the Red Flame Army is just like a little fireball. On a snowy night, you could throw on a thin armor, ride alone after the enemy for

hundreds of kilometres, and return to camp after their capture with no hint of shivering...and yet look at you now. Your body's damaged to such a degree..."

"All right," said Mei Changsu. He retrieved his hands and pulled the fur rug up. His tone was very light, as if they melted in the wind as soon as they left his lips, "That's why I don't like meeting with you often. I'm already a completely different person from the past. You'll only invoke sorrow if you compare us like this all the time. I don't want to have any weakness in my emotions right now. So please...don't talk about these things if you can avoid it in the future..."

Meng Zhi gazed at his face, which was as pale as snow. The eyes of such a manly person actually began to turn red. He suppressed them again and again, and finally said, "You're right. I was being all mushy like some little girl."

"Who would dare to call the greatest warrior of Liang a little girl?" Mei Changsu gave a smile to relieve his mood. "But take a look at Princess Nihuang. Even though she's a woman, she doesn't lose in any aspect to men."

Meng Zhi gave a hearty laugh as well. He stood up and said, "That's right. We need to be on our toes as well. We can't have the Princess surpassing us."

"Are you leaving, Meng?"

"Yeah. You should rest early as well. I'll come again tomorrow. If there's nothing important, I won't show myself."

Mei Changsu made a sound of approval. He was just about to get up to see Meng Zhi out, but was forcefully pressed back. Mei Changsu wasn't a stickler for customs, so he smiled and did not insist further.

Sure enough, Meng Zhi did not show himself the next day. It seemed like the three children's practise was satisfactory. After

dinner, Mei Changsu emphasized a bit on some notable items. He soothed the children and told them not to worry the next day, then sent the children back to their rooms early.

However, the Snow Cottage did not maintain such tranquility. About two hours later, an unexpected visitor arrived late at night.

Chapter 26: Late Night Visitor

Strictly speaking, this person shouldn't be termed a visitor, since the Snow Cottage Mei Changsu currently resides in is actually in her home. Only, she had never come for a visit during all this time.

Mei Changsu did not show his surprise. He gently coaxed Feiliu back into his room, who came out upon the commotion. He then gave a slight smile to Princess Liyang and bowed in greeting.

"The wind had risen. I've heard that you are unwell, Mr. Su. Let's talk inside." Princess Liyang wore a cool expression, but her tone was warm enough. She did not make any modest refusals when she saw Mei Changsu step aside to make way for her, and stepped indoors in the lead. With the warm air colliding into her, she untied the ribbons of her golden cloak.

She came quietly by herself, so there naturally weren't any maids near her. Mei Changsu stepped forward to take the cloak she slipped out of and hung it nearby. He then brought a teapot from the firepit and poured a cup of hot tea for her.

Princess Liyang cupped the tea in her hands, but did not bring it to her mouth. She wrapped her palms around the cup's edge, as if warming her hand. After a long while, she finally said, "Please accept my apologies for visiting at such a late time. It's just that if I were to come earlier, I'm afraid..."

Seeing her choke halfway through her words, Mei Changsu gave a faint smile and took over the other half, "Your Highness is afraid that Jingrui would still be here if you came earlier? In that case, Your Highness have some instructions for me alone?"

Princess Liyang raised her head and looked at him. Su Zhe was a commoner, and a wide gulf existed between the ranks of him and the Emperor's sister. The word "instructions" wasn't spoken only out of politeness. However, the many different lights shone on this man were dazzling, making it impossible for one to determine his

proper identity.

The chief of the world's biggest clan, the respected good friend of the finest noble gentlemen in the capital, the master of a guard that can compete with the greatest warrior of Liang, the target of the Crown Prince and Prince Yu's desperate recruitment attempts, a man in high favour and in an ambiguously affectionate relationship with Princess Nihuang... Combining all of these bits and pieces together, it's impossible for even the noble Princess Liyang to see him as a mere commoner.

And yet it is because she knows that he is definitely not a common man, and that he must have unmeasurable powers, that the reclusive princess came to this humble guest lodging, alone and in the depth of night.

"Regardless of what words you have for me, since you are here already, they must be spoken eventually. There is no need to hesitate, Your Highness." Mei Changsu had already gathered up the visitor's expression with a sweep of his eyes and continued slowly, "I will naturally accept Your Highness's instructions if it falls within my range of abilities. If it is something I am incapable of completing, I will not speak more than I should, nor spread gossip. Please rest assured, Your Highness."

Princess Liyang's gaze fixated slightly, as if she had mentally come to a decision. The cup in her palms had unknowingly been placed on the table at some point. She raised her head and looked straight into Mei Changsu's eyes. She said, pausing at each word, "Mr. Su. Please save Nihuang."

Upon hearing such a request, even someone with such a steady mental state as Mei Changsu could not conceal a flash of surprise in his expression. "What do you mean, Your Highness?"

"I've heard that Nihuang thinks highly of you, Mr. Su. I presume there must be affection between you two." Princess Liyang raised her hand to stop Mei Changsu, who looked as if he wanted to

clarify the statement, indicating for him to allow her to finish. “Though Nihuang is smart, she spends the majority of her time within her principality after all. She does not understand how deep and murky the waters of the capital are. She counts on the noble and powerful status of Yunnan, as well as herself being a top fighter amongst top fighters, and holds a playful attitude towards this tournament for her husband. She strongly believes that everything is within her control, and is thus rather careless.”

“From the sounds of Your Highness’s words, could it be that someone would actually dare to conspire against the Princess?”

“In order for the people in the capital to reach their objectives, is there anything they wouldn’t dare to do?” Princess Liyang thought of something, and her eyes revealed a hint of pain. “As one single person, Nihuang represents the entire stance of the Manor of the Prince of Yunnan, and represents the military power of the ten thousand cavalries at the southern border. Isn’t that importance worth it for someone to risk conspiring for?”

Mei Changsu raised his brows lightly and slowly nodded. Of course he had paid considerable measure to Princess Nihuang’s importance. That is why he had always wanted to find a way for her to completely support Prince Jing. Other people wouldn’t let go of this chance either, of course. However... Going by Princess Nihuang’s current powers and her adamant personality, who would dare to seize her might? And who would really be capable of reaching their objective through plots and conspiracies?

“I know what you are thinking of, Mr. Su.” Reading other people’s expressions isn’t a secret technique unique to East River. The princess who had grown up surrounded by crafty clouds and deceitful winds knows it as well. With one glance, a cool smile showed at the corner of her lips. “Nihuang is very strong indeed. Strong to the point where it seems unnecessary to protect her... But Mr. Su, you don’t understand. Regardless of how strong a woman is, she is still just a woman at the end of the day. Some

things that are inconsequential to men are enough of a blow to destroy the will of a woman. If Nihuang already has someone she likes, this blow will be even stronger. It'll make her feel that who she marries and what type of life she will lead in the future are all inconsequential..."

As she spoke, Princess Liyang's expression was very calm, and her tone was very cool. However, her slowly reddening eyes and her stiff and colourless fingers atop the table betrayed her boiling emotions.

Mei Changsu turned his head, hiding the sympathy rising in his eyes.

He had no memory of the Princess Liyang of the past, who was bright and lively with a fiery nature, and who would compete with the princes whenever they went hunting. He only had memories of his mother's quiet laments to herself when he complained to her about his Aunt Liyang being too cold and unapproachable.

How exactly the old incident occurred why it occurred were genuinely too secretive and too far in the distant past. Even though he had made deliberate investigations during these years, he was unable to find any valuable information. Perhaps the truth only exists hidden in the hearts of those few people, none of whom will say it out loud.

"Your Highness," said Mei Changsu slowly after pondering deeply for awhile, "I acknowledge the logic of your words, but I still cannot imagine it. What exactly is the method that can create such an effect?"

The corners of Princess Liyang's lips twitched slightly, as if she did not want to explain in details at all. However, she understood clearly that it would be impossible to gain his trust without revealing more details.

"His Majesty is privately very satisfied with two of the final ten candidates, and wish to pair them with the Princess. Do you know

who they are?”

Mei Changsu, of course, shook his head immediately.

“Sima Lei, son of the Grand Marshal, and Liao Tingjie, son of the Marquess of Zhongsu.”

“Right.” Mei Changsu was not surprised by the answer. It just so happened that between these two people, the Sima family supports the Crown Prince and the Marquess of Zhongsu supports Prince Yu. It was rather balanced. Who knows if it was purposefully designed by the Emperor, or if it was a coincidence?

“But going by the current rules of the tournament, none of those two have any possibility of winning unless the Princess throw a game and lose deliberately.”

“Right,” nodded Mei Changsu again. Far more than those two. None of the ten could win.

“That’s why, some people are getting worried. The support of Mu family of Yunnan is far too attractive. However, if the matter cannot be finalized during the Princess’s short stay in the capital, it will require twice the effort for half the result when she returns to Yunnan.” Princess Liyang suddenly gave a cold laugh, “At a time like this, Nihuang’s personal wishes have long since been outside these people’s consideration. The people within the Palace are experts in underhanded tactics. Some people who have knowledge of old events will inevitably attempt to imitate the method used by the Empress Dowager in the past...”

At the mention of the Empress Dowager, Mei Changsu’s heart quivered again. That’s right. Thinking about it now, Princess Liyang had rarely visited her mother in his recollections, nor had he ever seen her speak with the Empress Dowager. Only, his life was overflowing with rich and vibrant matters then, and he had thus never paid any attention to this strange situation.

Princess Liyang closed her eyes for a moment, as if needing to

calm herself. Because, what she was about to say next was the essential heart of the method.

“There is a type of wine in the Palace called ‘Coils of Passion’. It has the effect of inducing hallucination and sexual desire with just one cup. If a woman drinks it, she will mistake the man next to her as the person she dearly loves and longs for. Urged by the effects of the drug, she will take the initiative and beg to be embraced. She does not know about the existence of such a wine, so even when she sobers afterwards, she will believe that it was her weak will that led to her misconduct while being intoxicated. She furthermore cannot be angry at the man since she was the one who took the initiative. Ashamed and in despair, that feeling really is worse than death. But death had always been the most difficult affair throughout the ages. If she dies then, she will die without dignity. From then on, no matter how many unspoken words are hidden in her heart, it would be impossible for her to say them. If a trusted person comes forward then to advise her while she is feeling at loss, how could she have any energy to struggle or to refuse? She is only able to have others manipulate her as they wish...” Princess Liyang’s tone slowly changed as she reached towards the end of her speech. From her tragic sorrow, even the densest man would be able to see that what she spoke of was her own feelings, carved deep in her heart.

Mei Changsu stood up and walked slowly to the other end of the room. He turned his back towards her and averted his eyes, silently waiting for her to regain her calm.

About ten minutes later, Princess Liyang finally took in a deep breath and said slowly, “Please excuse me, Mr. Su. The woman who was framed in the past is a dear sister of mine, so I became a bit emotional. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not, Your Highness. Something like this really makes one’s hair rise. Your Highness will inevitably feel angry and sympathetic even if it wasn’t your sister. Only, I do not quite

understand. Who was the recipient of Your Highness...’s sister love, that the Empress Dowager would be so opposed to the point of...”

Princess Liyang gazed into the distance, as if crossing through time to fall upon that certain point far away, “He was...a hostage prince...sent to Liang from the Southern Chu empire...”

Mei Changsu’s confusions cleared immediately, and he couldn’t bear to ask further.

“Although Nihuang is not related to me by blood, her dazzling spirit reminds me of the past. It makes me admire her.” Princess Liyang seemed to have finally overcome the peak of her pain, and her expression slowly calmed. “If someone plans to use such underhanded tactics against her, I must prevent it no matter what. I hope you will assist me, Mr. Su.”

Mei Changsu’s eyes flickered. He paused, then finally ended up asking anyway, “How did Your Highness...came to learn about this conspiracy?”

Even though Princess Liyang knew that he would pose such a question, she still couldn’t prevent turning her head to avoid the gaze that was not actually intense. Finally, she answered softly, “Xie Bi, that child. He wants to be involved, but his heart is not hard enough. I saw him ill at ease, and forced the truth out of him after questioning...”

“Ah.” Mei Changsu nodded and asked the next question, “With Your Highness’s status, there must be many ways to prevent this. Why did you decide to choose me?”

Princess Liyang gave a mocking laugh and responded coldly, “Many ways? I doubt it. The event has not transpired. Should I question the mastermind? They will not admit to it. Should I report it to His Majesty the Emperor? I have no evidence to back my empty words. I would enter the Palace myself to prevent it, but who knows when they will make their move? What can this status

of a princess actually achieve during such a time?”

Mei Changsu pondered for a moment. He wanted to ask her why she didn't ask her own husband for help, but he suddenly realized that this method was the same as the one in the past. Even if Xie Yu was not a co-conspirator then and was simply used by the Empress Dowager, he was still a benefactor at the end of the day. It would be rather awkward to discuss it with him. Besides, one would certainly offend the mastermind if one were to actually help prevent the event from occurring. Xie Yu was not a hot-blooded youth. He wouldn't necessarily agree to help.

To think about it, the noble princess really had nobody to ask for help. It really does make one sigh in pity. However...

“Your Highness, even if I had the desire to help, I'm afraid that my hands are rather tied as a mere commoner...”

“Don't you have close ties with Princess Nihuang? Besides, you will see her tomorrow. Please give this information to her then and tell her to be careful when dealing with the ladies in the Palace. That should guarantee her safety.”

“Why don't you tell her yourself, Your Highness?”

“I have always been cold and reserved. Even though I've always admired Nihuang in private, I do not have close ties with her. She may not believe me. More importantly, they already know that I've discovered this conspiracy. As soon as I enter the Palace, there will definitely be a lady to accompany me by my side. I won't have an opportunity to speak in detail with Nihuang privately... Luckily, you reside within this manor, Mr. Su. I still have some powers here. I believe that I can conceal this late night visit from those people. Only, I must trouble you, Mr. Su.”

Mei Changsu looked at her thoughtfully. He spoke meaningfully, “I do not have close ties with Your Highness. It really is my honour to be the recipient of such deep trust.”

The clever Princess Liyang understood. She smiled lightly, “It is rather presumptuous of me to visit so suddenly. But firstly, I really don’t have anyone else to ask for help. Secondly, I know that you have close ties with Nihuang. Thirdly... Jingrui always praises you endlessly before me. This child has a pure heart, so the person he likes and respects should not be a common man. However, I have considered it before coming here. This may implicate you in offending nobility, so it is understandable for you to refuse my request. Please consider it carefully.”

After saying that, Princess Liyang lowered her head and began to drink her tea in silence. Mei Changsu stared at the few inconspicuous strands of white woven in her head of black hair. He suddenly felt a slight pang in his heart, and a feeling of aloofness rose.

“It is late. You should return, Your Highness.” The drums striking the time sounded from outside the window. Mei Changsu retrieved the golden cloak from the hanger and gently draped them over her frail shoulders. He spoke slowly, “The Princess is my friend. I will most certainly put in my fullest efforts. I must ask for Your Highness to enter the Palace as well tomorrow, in order to act accordingly to any change in circumstance.”

Princess Liyang did not speak any further after gaining his promise. She raised the hood of her cloak over her head and quietly exited the little courtyard. She disappeared into the darkness in no short time.

Mei Changsu stood before the steps and saw her out with his eyes. The night wind rushed at him, injecting coldness all over his body. A pair of hands grabbed him from behind and forcefully pulled him inside. He turned around and saw a pair of bright eyes with a hint of anger in them.

“Sorry, sorry, Su forgot to wear his jacket.” He patted the youth’s head to comfort him. “Our Feiliu still hasn’t fallen asleep?”

“She leave. Wake!”

“Ah, she woke you up?” Mei Changsu smiled apologetically. He curled up on the warm bed and gathered the thick cotton blanket around him. “Go back to sleep, then. Don’t you have to go out to play tomorrow?”

“You sleep!”

“Okay, okay, I’ll sleep too.” Mei Changsu closed his eyes obediently. He appeared calm and peaceful, but he recalled old and new information on all aspects of the capital like running water in his head. He used them to determine what exactly was hidden behind the purpose of Princess Liyang’s visit.

Feiliu did not return to his room. Instead, he squeezed next to his Su and snored away, satisfied.

Mei Changsu tucked him in and slowly laid his body flat. Just before he fell into the world of dreams, he was still thinking about a final question: “The Crown Prince’s spy who had concealed himself near Prince Yu... Who exactly is he?”

Chapter 27: A Strategy Of Swords

Because he had gone to bed late the previous night, Mei Changsu remained in a dazed sleep late into the morning. Fei Liu stood guard outside his door, refusing to let anyone enter to wake him up. As the time to enter the palace grew nearer, the others grew more and more worried, gathering agitatedly in front of Mei Changsu's door. In the end, it was Yan Yujin who came up with an idea. He shouted through the courtyard's wall, "Wake up, Brother Su!" Fei Liu leapt up in a fury and began chasing him around the courtyard, whereupon Xiao Jingrui took the chance to sneak towards the door. Who knew Fei Liu could move so fast – in the next moment, he had reappeared before Mei Changsu's door to block Xiao Jingrui's entrance. But on the other side, Yan Yujin unabashedly kept shouting, and Fei Liu in a sudden frenzy of frustration flew towards Xiao Jingrui and began fighting him. The poor Xiao Jingrui began fending off Fei Liu's attacks, all the while yelling, "Why are you hitting me? I'm not the one who's shouting!"

Xie Bi, who had hid himself in a far corner, analyzed the situation: "Fei Liu wants to knock you unconscious so he can go after Yujin...."

On hearing this, Yan Yujin shuddered and redoubled his efforts, on the one hand calling loudly for "Brother Su!" and on the other shouting encouragement to his friend, "Hang in there a bit longer!"

In a few minutes, the situation in the courtyard had disintegrated into a complete mess, and no matter how deeply asleep Mei Changsu was inside, he couldn't help being woken by all the noise.

When the servants saw him open the door and tell Fei Liu to release his victims, they hurriedly carried in hot water and breakfast. Yan Yujin opened his mouth as soon as he entered Snow Cottage, but was stopped by Xiao Jingrui, who waited until Mei

Changsu had finished his congee and put down his bowl before gesturing at his friend to proceed.

“Brother Su, this morning there was an order from the palace saying the written test will be delayed until tomorrow.” Yan Yujin was fairly bursting with the news.

“Oh, why?”

“Because today you need to take care of this Baili Qi!” Yan Yujin threw open his fan with the ease of practice and had just begun to wave it when he noticed Xiao Jingrui glaring at him. He stared blankly back for a moment before realizing that the wind from his fan was causing Mei Changsu to flinch back, and hurriedly closed it again. But he continued to hit the fan against his palm with a dashing sort of air, almost as if he was the one who would be taking care of Baili Qi.

Xie Bi, seeing that the Young Master Yan was busy trying to look cool and didn't seem about to keep talking, hurriedly seized the opportunity to continue the conversation. He explained, “It's like this. His Highness Prince Yu stated that even if Brother Su's young boys defeat Baili Qi today, Baili Qi's status as a finalist wouldn't change and he would still have to undergo the written test. However, having just been beaten, his emotions would naturally be in a turmoil, which would make the situation unfair. Since this issue of choosing a husband isn't all that urgent, why not postpone the written test by a day, to prevent the Northern Yan from taking this excuse to spread gossip about the situation?”

“This is a well-thought out suggestion. Has His Majesty allowed it?”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” Mei Changsu nodded. “Thank you. The hour is not early, I should get going. I will say goodbye to you all.”

“Say goodbye?” Xiao Jingrui dazedly handed him his coat. “We

can leave together.”

Mei Changsu gave them a look. “Where are you going?”

“To see how you’re going to defeat Baili Qi!”

Mei Changsu couldn’t help laughing. “Wuying Hall is an imperial hall, not one of those entertainment halls you usually visit. Last time, you went because you were summoned by His Majesty. Originally, you would have gone with me today because of the written test after the competition. Now that the written test has been cancelled, what reason would you have to go to the Wuying Hall? Even though you are well-respected noble sons, you still at least need an imperial decree to enter, no?”

“Ah!” Yan Yujin cried out in frustration, jumping to his feet. “I forgot! And we’ve wasted so much time! I must go request an invitation. I’d rather die than miss this show!”

Xie Bi didn’t seem to care much – he hadn’t wanted to go in the first place. But Xiao Jingrui was frozen in indecision, turning on the one hand to follow his friend out, and turning on the other hand towards Mei Changsu.

“Don’t worry,” Mei Changsu smilingly gave him a push. “Xie Bi will arrange the horses and carriage for me. Go and request your invitation. You don’t want to miss the excitement, do you?”

Xiao Jingrui’s face lit up in a smile, and he ran out of the courtyard after an enthusiastic “No!”

Xie Bi watched him leave and sighed, “He’s becoming more and more like Yujin. He never used to enjoy excitement like this....”

Mei Changsu didn’t want to try to explain the appeal of this particular fight to Xie Bi, who wasn’t very knowledgeable about martial arts, so he fastened his coat against the wind, spoke quietly to Fei Liu, and then led the three children, who had long since been standing ready to one side, out of the courtyard.

The horse and carriage were waiting outside the manor gates. Xie

Bi looked around, then said with a smile, “Princess Nihuang didn’t send a horse and carriage today. Brother Su, aren’t you a bit disappointed?”

Mei Changsu smiled in reply and drew the curtains of the carriage shut. The driver cracked his whip, the sound echoing crisply, and drove towards the palace.

There were far fewer people in Wuying Hall today than the last time. Apart from Baili Qi, none of the other finalists were present, and only a couple representatives of the Da Yu delegation had arrived. Prince Jing was there early, because of Tingshen, but neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu was anywhere to be seen. They were probably with the Emperor, and would arrive with him later. The Mu siblings had no reason to be early either, and so it was that when Mei Changsu brought the three children into the hall, he received no other greeting aside from a nod from Prince Jing. It was indeed a great contrast to the excitement of the previous few days.

But Mei Changsu actually preferred the peaceful environment. He led his three pupils into a corner, grasped their hands one by one, and smiled and spoke encouragingly to them. Before long, their bulging eyes and terrified gazes had settled into serious nods, as they promised to do their best, and to make use of this opportunity to leave behind their status as criminal slaves.

Around half of a quarter hour later, Princess Nihuang and Mu Qing came in, radiating an aura of health and vigor. Mei Changsu welcomed them, smiling, and privately wondered how these two managed to glow with energy no matter where or when he saw them – such a contrast when compared to the languidly graceful air the nobility of the capital were used to putting on. Only Prince Jing held a similar sort of presence to these two.

“From Mister Su’s expression, looks like you’ve got a card up your sleeve?” Mu Qing had spoken first. He stepped closer and bent over to the three children. “Tell me, what has Mister Su been

teaching you?”

Mei Changsu thought there was nothing wrong with letting the children become familiar with some of the people in the hall, so he didn't stop Mu Qing, instead indicating with a glance for Princess Nihuang to follow him a few steps away.

“Some secrets to tell me?” The commander of the Southern border smiled.

“I've been asked to warn you.” Mei Changsu spoke in a quiet voice. “Since it looks like it will be impossible to marry you, some in the palace are planning to force you to submit. Beware of Prince Yu and the Empress.....if they invite you to dinner alone, try to decline if possible.....”

“Force me to submit?” Princess Nihuang looked shocked for a moment, then laughed proudly. “How do they want to force me?”

But there were some things Mei Changsu couldn't explain in detail, so he only said vaguely, “You must not underestimate the methods of the Inner Palace. Be careful of anything you put in your mouth.....”

He was about to continue, when suddenly footsteps sounded from outside and Yan Yujin rushed in, dragging Xiao Jingrui after him. “We made it, we made it,” he laughed. “Brother Su, it still hasn't started?”

Mu Qing, unhappiness written all over his face, blocked his path and frowned. “It hasn't started. Mister Su was talking to my sister – don't disturb them!”

However, his vehement protection actually stopped Princess Nihuang from returning to their private conversation. As an unwedded girl of the royal family who had yet to select her husband, such behaviour might not be considered appropriate.

Fortunately, the embarrassing moment passed quickly as just then, the royal carriage was announced.

As everyone had predicted, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu were supporting the Emperor on either side, with Princess Jingning following behind, and Commander Meng standing guard. After the Emperor had been seated, the two princes and Jingning descended the jade steps and led everyone in the hall in the ceremonial bows before separating to take their seats.

“Subject Su,” the Emperor smiled at him. “How are your results?”

“Your servant will not waste words. I pray Your Majesty will watch the following events.” Mei Changsu gestured to the three children, who came forward and knelt in a line.

The Emperor eyed the three small figures, and looked again at the heavily-muscled Baili Qi, and, unable to help the stir of uncertainty in his heart, turned to Commander Meng.

“Your Majesty, shall we begin?” Commander Meng, bowing, took the opportunity to obtain the imperial decree.

The arrow has already been strung; it must be fired. The Emperor, eyes filled with worry, nodded his head.

The three children rose, drew out their swords, and stood in a cluster. Their stances were perfectly steady, their solemn concentration a stark contrast to the trembling terror they had displayed two days ago. The spectators were startled.

Baili Qi stepped forward, empty-handed, and eyed his opponents disdainfully before casually striking a starting pose.

“Begin!” As soon as Meng Zhi gave the command, a sudden wind rose up in the hall, as the three children spun like tops, their steps crisscrossing, and their previously crisp silhouettes becoming indistinct. Those less skilled in martial arts saw nothing but blurs of motion.

[Jin Diao Chai Ming of Da Yu](#) was instantly interested. He sat up straight and was about to focus his eyes to examine the fight

closely when he suddenly felt a wave of intense hostility hit him from the side. He felt a shiver deep in his heart, and turned his head in confusion, but only saw Da Liang's first-ranked fighter, Commander General of the Jinling Imperial Guard Meng Zhi glaring at him fiercely. The fury in his expression was equal to the kind of hatred one might feel for someone who had murdered his father or stolen his wife. Chai Ming couldn't help shuddering, and carefully focused on calming his mind as he reflected carefully on how he might have offended him.

Jin Diao Chai Ming (from Da Yu) is ranked number five on the Lang Ya Bang Top Ten List of Martial Art Experts. Meng Zhi is ranked number two. Nihuang is ranked number ten. They are by far the greatest martial arts experts watching the fight, aside from Lin Shu himself.

Princess Nihuang's martial arts were also known to be splendid, and she was captivated immediately by the blurring silhouettes. She was just leaning forward to watch carefully when a sudden "Aiya!" sounded from the Mei Changsu beside her. She reflexively glanced over, and saw that he had knocked over his teacup and was busily trying to avoid the tea that had spilled all over his table. His clumsy efforts were such a contrast to his normal effortless grace that the Princess couldn't help smiling.

Just as the two experts' attentions were simultaneously diverted, a few stifled groans rose up from the fight, and then with a final thump, the three children sheathed their swords and leapt back. The blur faded, and when the spectators could see again, Baili Qi was half-kneeling on the floor, supporting his weight with his arms, his face filled with fury.

"They've won!"

"They've won!"

Yan Yujin and Princess Jingning cried out together joyfully. Even the Emperor gave a small smile.

Chai Ming, who had been focusing on calming his mind and heart against Meng Zhi's wave of fury, suddenly felt his whole body relax. Meng Zhi's expression, which had previously been directed towards him with such irreconcilable hatred, suddenly eased into a sincere, friendly smile. In that instant, he wondered whether he had just woken from a dream.

"Warrior Baili, are you alright?" The Northern Yan messenger shouted in urgent fury.

"The honoured messenger does not need to worry. We would not hurt guests." Mei Changsu smiled, and then said to the three children, "Shouldn't you thank His Majesty?"

The three small fighters immediately fell to their knees in a bow. The Emperor, greatly pleased, said, "You have worked hard. We will not go back on our words. You will be absolved of your status as criminal slaves, and may be placed into a department, and may receive help from relatives and friends."

Princess Jingning was overjoyed, and said immediately, "Father Emperor has such integrity and benevolence!"

The Emperor eyed his daughter and had a sudden thought. "Jingning, do you really care about these children so much? Since they have this training, why not have them castrated and sent to wait on you? They will be stronger than your average bodyguards on the one hand, and they will not need to worry about providing for themselves on the other hand, and can live in some comfort...."

As soon as he had spoken, Mei Changsu and Prince Jing both paled, especially Prince Jing, who was about to jump to his feet, and who was only stopped by Mei Changsu's forceful glare.

"Your Majesty, this is inappropriate." Unexpectedly, the person who objected was Xiao Jingrui, who stood up and bowed, and then continued loudly, "Your Majesty has already bestowed your mercy in allowing them to leave the Secluded Court, and to allow them to be free in the future. The Imperial mouth has spoken; how can it

take back its word? And anyway, they are not familiar with the rules of the Inner Palace. And it is not permitted to use weapons when waiting on the Princess, so their training is useless. Thus, Jingrui believes even Princess Jingning herself may not wish for them to be castrated to enter the Inner Palace.”

Princess Jingning hurriedly added, “Yes, that’s right. My palace only has eunuchs; what use would these three be? Let my Father Emperor bestow another gift to me.”

The Emperor had always doted on Xiao Jingrui, and was not angered by his blunt words, but rather waved a hand to return him to his seat and didn’t raise the subject again. A thin film of cold sweat had already covered Mei Changsu’s body.

“Mister Su has shown good teaching methods and exemplary work. Once the written tests are over, we shall bestow other rewards.” The Emperor was in such a good mood that he personally poured out a cup of wine and sent it to Mei Changsu. “We first raise a toast to you, to celebrate this battle.”

Mei Changsu thanked the Emperor and accepted the cup. He drained its contents, and couldn’t help coughing. His face flushed red as he used all his strength to suppress the coughs.

The Emperor spoke some superficial words of comfort to Baili Qi and the Northern Yan messenger, and happily left to return to his residence. As soon as he left, Mei Changsu covered his mouth with his sleeve and coughed so violently that he bent double over himself. Xiao Jingrui leapt over the tables to his side, holding him upright and patting his back. The Crown Prince and Prince Yu also hurried over.

“It’s alright.....the fragrance of His Majesty’s wine was too overwhelming.....” After coughing for a good amount of time, Mei Changsu finally uncovered his mouth and, leaning on Xiao Jingrui’s shoulder, lifted his head. The Crown Prince and Prince Yu, to show their concern, had stepped quite close. But in contrast

to the last time at this Wuying Hall, there was not the slightest trace of perfume on their person, which was certainly not a coincidence.

Mei Changsu was once again certain – one of Prince Yu's people had to be spying for the Crown Prince.

“You're not in a hurry, are you? Would you like to rest before leaving?” Princess Nihuang, who had just been taken aside by a palace servant, had hurried back now.

“No matter,” Mei Changsu smiled faintly. He turned to the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, and said, “Your Highnesses must be very busy with the affairs of the kingdom. I could not bear the consequences if you were delayed on my account.”

It seemed as if the two indeed had other affairs, and in any case did not want to cause too much bother, and so they turned and left after exchanging a few more polite words. Mu Qing pulled Yan Yujin away with one hand, and reached out to push at Xiao Jingrui with the other, but the latter would not budge.

“Brother Su isn't steady on his feet yet.” Xiao Jingrui understood that Mu Qing wanted him to give his sister and Mei Changsu some privacy, but he steadfastly stood his ground.

Princess Nihuang couldn't help smiling, and eyed the Young Master Xiao with interest, before leaning down to speak quietly to Mei Changsu. “My Lady the Empress has invited me to dine at her palace. I cannot refuse this; I must go.”

“Princess!” Mei Changsu hurriedly tried to stop her, but found after a few moments of thought that he had nothing else to say, and finally only sighed, “Please take care.”

After Princess Nihuang left, there were not many people remaining in the great hall. Mei Changsu felt very unwell, and as it was not permitted to use paladins or carriages within the Forbidden Garden, he could only sit and rest, with Xiao Jingrui

and Yan Yujin naturally by his side.

Princess Jingning had been talking to Prince Jing, and when the conversation ended, Xiao Jingyan came over to see how he was doing. After they ran out of things to say, Prince Jing took the opportunity to take Tingshen off to one side for a few words.

Because the Emperor had left straight for the residence of the concubines, Meng Zhi had not followed. And because he was worried about Lin Shu, he had not left, but stayed inside the hall and called the other two children to him to demonstrate their sword dance. Yan Yujin was greatly interested and went over for a closer look, while Xiao Jingrui alone remained by Mei Changsu's side. Seeing the cold sweat continuously breaking out on Mei Changsu's forehead, he leaned over and asked quietly, "Was the cup of wine really that strong? Is your illness acting up?"

Mei Changsu was fighting to suppress his internal pain and anguish. He knew in his heart that the wine had indeed caused the old wounds to flare, and didn't want to speak, so only sat quietly with his eyes closed. Meng Zhi, after repeatedly glancing in his direction, finally couldn't stand it any longer and hurried over.

"How is Mister Su?"

"I'm not sure," Xiao Jingrui was so worried that his voice shook. "He has rested for such a long time, but he doesn't seem to be getting better."

"Let me see." Meng Zhi reached out and grasped his pulse, and instantly his brow furrowed. He gathered his energy, and then thrust a portion of strength into him, helping him subdue the injury.

By now, Yan Yujin, Prince Jing, and Princess Jingning had all realized something wasn't right, and hurried over together. The three children also gathered around, faces drawn with worry.

Almost an hour later, Meng Zhi let out a long breath, his face

clearing up. Mei Changsu withdrew his wrist and thanked him quietly. His voice seemed a bit stronger, his words less broken up than before.

“You really scared me....” Yan Yujin hated this type of somber atmosphere, and let out a loud sigh. “I’m glad that ended well. Brother Su’s health is really too frail; you must rest and let it recuperate. Jingrui, let’s hurry and take Brother Su home. And I guess we won’t be able to make it to our polo match today....”

“Of course not! How can you still have the heart to play polo?” Xiao Jingrui was extremely unhappy.

“I don’t want to play, but we must let Liao Tingjie know; after all, we promised to be there.”

“You go tell him then. I won’t go.”

Mei Changsu listened to the two of them talking, and felt a fleeting sense of strangeness pass over his mind, but he couldn’t catch it in time, and his brow furrowed in thought.

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling unwell again?” Xiao Jingrui asked hurriedly.

“No.....you were saying.....you promised to play polo with someone?”

“Liao Tingjie – you wouldn’t know him, he’s the heir of the Marquis of Zhongsu....”

The strange feeling he had been feeling since sometime in the morning suddenly welled up, and like a flash of light passing through, Mei Changsu suddenly understood, and his chest filled with turmoil.

The Princess had been invited into the palace, and by logic the Empress and Prince Yu should have long since made their preparations. So why.....why would Liao Tingjie, the man Prince Yu’s camp had designated to become the Princess’ husband, have time to arrange to play polo outside the palace?

Everything the Grand Princess Liyang had spoken the previous night flew through his mind, and instantly, he grasped the strangest point.

The Grand Princess had said that the reason she knew about the plan was because she had seen Xie Bi's troubled expression and had forced it out of him. But this morning, Xie Bi had seemed cheerful, and had even joked about Princess Nihuang when they were leaving. He had not appeared to have even a shred of discomfort in his heart.

And from another point of view, the risks the Empress and Prince Yu would have to take with this plan were huge, and so only the few people directly involved would know about it, to minimize the risk of others finding out. Xie Bi couldn't possibly contribute to this kind of Inner Palace business, so why would Prince Yu tell him anything?

Therefore, Princess Liyang had lied about this part – a part she had thought wasn't vital to the information itself, but that she had found inconvenient enough to lie about. And because the source of her information couldn't have been Xie Bi, then the source should have come from her husband, the Marquis of Ning, Xie Yu.

All those years ago, only a few people had known about the methods of the then-Empress, but Xie Yu was one of them. If he had been overheard by Grand Princess Liyang this time giving instructions to his servants, then even if the instructions had been curt and coded, she would have understood immediately.

And the most important mistake lay in this final part.

To hide her source, Princess Liyang had named Xie Bi, but Mei Changsu was very clear that Xie Bi was on Prince Yu's side, so naturally, he had believed that the person behind this plan to drug the Princess was the Empress. What he had overlooked was that, actually, the whole thing had nothing to do with Xie Bi, but rather, was the work of his father, Xie Yu.

And as for which side Xie Yu had chosen.....which side Xie Yu had chosen....

Mei Changsu's breathing had become rapid, and he clenched his teeth.

Staying neutral? Keeping himself out of the fight for the crown? Others may not know, but he himself knew most well what kind of a person Xie Yu was. Xie Yu was tainted by his history, and knew that he could not remain a simple official, so with the Emperor slowly aging, how could he not plan for the future? Xie Bi was already well-known to be one of Prince Yu's supporter, so he had long since offended the Crown Prince, and if the Crown Prince succeeds, then the Xie Clan would be punished accordingly. Thus, remaining neutral in such circumstances would be completely meaningless. With Xie Yu's intelligence, there was no way he would do something meaningless. But the fact remained that he had played dumb, and had let his son support Prince Yu while he himself seemingly kept himself out of the fight for the crown. That meant he must have some other flawless plan up his sleeve – a plan that would let him emerge victorious no matter who won in the end.

Xie Bi openly supported Prince Yu, so Xie Yu secretly supported the Crown Prince. Then he could tell the Crown Prince that Xie Bi was spying on Prince Yu, and occasionally support this claim with some information. He could show that he was fooling Prince Yu, and please the Crown Prince even more.

As long as he could keep up the pretense, the future would be secure: if Prince Yu won, the Xie Clan would survive because of Xie Bi. If the Crown Prince won, both father and son would be celebrated, with even better results.

Therefore, underneath it all, Xie Yu must be genuinely supporting the Crown Prince.

At this point, Mei Changsu's forehead was dripping with cold

sweat.

The true danger, therefore, was not with the Empress in Zhengyang Palace, but with the Crown Prince's birth mother, Noble Consort Yue, in Zhaoren Palace. If the Princess was only careful with the Empress, would she lower her guard with Noble Consort Yue and walk into the trap laid before her?

Perhaps there was yet time enough to prevent the worst from taking place....

“Your Highness Prince Jing, please enter the palace immediately and ask whether the Princess has entered Noble Consort Yue's Zhaoren Palace. If she has, you must go there immediately, and find her no matter the cost.” Mei Changsu stood up abruptly and gripped Prince Jing's hand tightly, saying fiercely, “Princess Nihuang is in danger right now. I will explain everything to you later, but now you must go! Hurry!”

Although Xiao Jingyan was entirely baffled, when he saw the intensity of his expression, he immediately believed him, and turned and hurried away.

“Princess Jingning, please, you must go right away to Great Grandmo-to the Grand Empress Dowager, and ask her to immediately attend Zhaoren Palace. This is also to save Nihuang. You must not waste a second.....” Mei Changsu had turned to Xiao Jingning, his tone still urgent. “Your Highness may remember she still owes me a favour; please repay it now.”

Xiao Jingning took a few steps back, somewhat at a loss, but on hearing that this was to save her Nihuang [jiejie](#), her heart shuddered and without further thought, she immediately sprang into action.

Jiejie = older sister (affectionate), female equivalent of “Gege” as in Fei Liu's “Su Gege”

“Commander Meng, please immediately arrange for some of your

men to wait in ambush outside of Zhaoren Palace, and to immediately arrest the noble son of Wei, Sima Lei, if he appears, for the crime of trespassing on palace grounds. Can you do that?”

Meng Zhi also didn't waste time on words, simply patted his shoulder and said, “Don't worry,” before flying out the door.

In the great hall, only the two noble sons were left, bewilderedly wondering what had just taken place, and staring at Mei Changsu.

“Brother Su...this...what's happening?” After a while, Yan Yujin managed to speak.

Mei Changsu closed his eyes, looking very tired, and released a somber sigh. He murmured, “It's my fault...I was mistaken about something...I can only hope now...that the worst has not yet happened....”

Chapter 28: Noble Consort Yue

When the cup of pure, sweet wine arrived before Princess Nihuang, she accepted it without any hesitation, and lifted her head to smile at the one toasting her.

Noble Consort Yue withdrew her hand, meticulously manicured fingers lingering in the air a moment before returning to her side. As she stepped back, her elegant purple phoenix robes swayed gently around her beautiful figure, and a hint of fragrance hovered in the air after her. She too was from Yunnan, had left her native land to enter the palace thirty five years ago, and had not returned home once. As she discussed their home land with Nihuang, her eyes seemed to fill, as if the long years of a young girl's memories had descended upon her again.

Because of the grief of her remembrance, Princess Nihuang relaxed the tight guard she had been keeping up in the Empress' palace.

“The gulls return every year to the Jade Lake, and the scenery has not changed very much, except that willows have been planted along the shore, which has added a gentle beauty. The Jade Pavilion my lady spoke of is still there, but the small resting place was lost in a fire, and has already been reconstructed at another site.” Nihuang lifted the cup to her lips but didn't drink, only slightly wet her lips, before continuing, “As for the high monk of divination my lady mentioned, I have never met him there.”

“They are likely destined meetings. This high monk truly has the gift of divination. Were he here, we would be able to ask about the Princess' marriage prospects.” Noble Consort Yue spoke indifferently, but when she saw the Princess' cup grow still in her hands, she did not continue her persuasion, but smiled sweetly and drained her own cup. In the past, she had been one of the greatest beauties of the radiant Inner Palace, and with her elegant attire and exquisitely made up appearance, her smile had the ability to

topple countries and kingdoms. But the faint wrinkles creeping along the corners of her eyes were carved by time itself, and against time, none could hope to win.

“If my lady misses our home land so much, why not ask His Majesty for permission to visit once more?”

“I cannot compare to my lady Empress, whose home is [Jinling](#). The journey from the capital to Yunnan must pass through remote areas, and only if traveled with companions would there be any hope of returning for a visit. If I were to ask for permission to travel alone, I fear it would not be permitted. But as for the future....” At this point, Noble Consort Yue suddenly realized the impropriety of her words and hurriedly closed her mouth.

Princess Nihuang understood, and pretended not to take notice, but let the words pass by unheeded. As a Noble Consort, it would not be possible to leave the Inner Palace to travel over land and water for a visit home, but in the future, if the Crown Prince ascended to the throne, then travelling on an inspection tour as the Empress Dowager would not be difficult to arrange. But such a future was founded on the passing of the old emperor, and was thus certainly not something to be carelessly spoken.

However, even if the words weren’t spoken plainly, as the Crown Prince’s birth mother, she would eventually arrive at such a future, barring any unforeseen circumstances. But the truth was that no one could guess how the winds and fortunes of the royal family would blow, and whether any such unforeseen circumstances would take place was impossible to predict.

At least, the existence of Prince Yu, Xiao Jinghuan, was currently the thorn in the side of this pair of mother and son.

Prince Yu’s birth mother was of lowly ranking and had succumbed to an early death, and his own birth ranking fell after the Crown Prince’s, so by rights he had no right to the fight for the crown. But he was raised in the Empress’ palace, where he was

noticed and adopted by the childless Empress. And although the [Imperial Uncle](#) had long since adopted the leisurely life of a Daoist monk, the disciples and supporters of Old Master Yan still formed a great portion of the base of the Empress' power. In addition, Prince Yu was naturally clever with an elegant air, and was highly adept at pleasing the Emperor, gaining much favor, and being obviously superior to the other princes, had emerged as a direct opponent of the Crown Prince.

Having been immersed in the Inner Palace for all these years, this lady who had been made a noble consort by her radiant beauty was perfectly clear: the days of stability, relaxation, and riches were yet far away.

“Ni Huang, how long can you stay in the capital this time? I always hope to have people from our home land like you around, to come visit often....”

“Recently, the Southern border has been peaceful, and since [Qing di](#) has received the Emperor's approval, I have been much more at ease. I will probably stay another month or two.”

“Leaving so soon?” Noble Consort Yue looked shocked. “After choosing a husband, the wedding must be planned.”

Ni Huang smiled faintly and didn't protest, only saying, “If one is chosen, then I will think about it.”

“The Princess is no ordinary young lady. The splendors of the capital hold no attraction for you; rather, the grasslands and vast jungles of the South are more suited to your disposition.”

On hearing this, Ni Huang couldn't help smiling. “Although my lady has been in the capital for such a long time, you still have a bit of the temperament of a Yunnan lady.”

“Who has not once possessed the high spirits of youth? But after all these years in the palace, it has all been eroded away.” Noble Consort Yue shook her head and sighed. “Like today – I would like

nothing more than to reminisce about our home land with the Princess, but...even if I said that was my only intention, I fear the Princess would not believe me?”

Princess Nihuang stared at her for a long moment, then answered simply, “No.”

“Then I will come to the point.” Noble Consort Yue took on a solemn air, her tone growing serious. “The noble son Sima Lei, one of the finalists of the competition and hand-picked by the Crown Prince, is skilled in both literary and martial pursuits, as well as talented and virtuous. Although his martial arts cannot be compared to the Princess’, you are an expert in this area, so what need have you for a top martial fighter as a husband? I can guarantee, this Sima Lei would be a very good match for you. And anyway you and I share a home land, and the Crown Prince has always greatly respected you. At this time, please do support the Crown Prince, Princess.”

Princess Nihuang waited quietly for her to finish, then said with a smile, “The Crown Prince is the heir apparent. The Mu House of Yunnan will serve the Crown Prince in the future after he takes the throne with as much loyalty as it serves His Majesty now; my lady does not need to worry about this. As for choosing a husband, His Majesty has already set the rules of the competition, and as the noble son Sima Lei is so accomplished, what is there to worry about?”

On hearing this reply, which was neither positive nor negative, Noble Consort Yue only wrinkled her brow, and laughed ruefully. “I knew all along I would receive an answer of this sort, but I still had to ask. This is really our Yunnan temperament – I suppose it cannot be changed. Alright, as the Princess has answered so candidly, how can I keep forcing the topic? Allow me to lift this cup in a toast of apology. If the Princess will forgive my presumptuousness, then please accept this toast, and in the future when you and I meet again, we will certainly only speak of the

scenes of the past, and not bring up these courtly concerns.”

Noble Consort Yue lifted her cup behind her sleeve and drained it. Nihuang couldn't persist in refusing to drink, and although this was still palace grounds, it wasn't the Empress' Zhengyang Palace. She stared at the small cup, then slowly drank it down.

Seeing the wine disappear down her throat, a look of grief unexpectedly flickered across Noble Consort Yue's eyes, but the determination set in her brows did not falter. She delicately sliced the tangerine before her, her movements smooth and steady as she peeled away the skin and offered one to Princess Nihuang.

“Is this a tangerine from our home land?” Nihuang tasted the fruit in astonishment.

“Yes. Tangerines have no legs, yet they are able to travel to the capital. I, on the other hand, have legs, but cannot step into the places of the past....” Noble Consort Yue's expression was mournful, as if she was remembering her home, but also as if she was having other thoughts.

“My lady does not...” Nihuang was about to speak, when a palace servant girl appeared to report, “My lady consort, the Crown Prince and the noble son of Sima request an audience.”

“Oh, what a coincidence,” Noble Consort Yue pressed a hand to her mouth, smiling. “I had forgotten that I had asked him to bring the noble son of Sima over to see me. Since the Princess is here already, you wouldn't mind coming to see him, would you?”

Princess Nihuang felt doubt stirring in her heart, but couldn't think of any way they could act against her, and as she was thinking, the Crown Prince had already entered smiling with a tall, handsome, splendidly-dressed gentleman in tow, and ordered Sima Lei to greet the Princess with a bow.

After these many days of tournament and the banquet in Wuying Hall, this was certainly not the first time Princess Nihuang had

seen Sima Lei. But in contrast to the previous meetings, as the man drew near this time and met her eye, she suddenly felt her heart lurch.

She closed her eyes and held her breath, calming her mind, and then Nihuang felt acutely the danger that now lay before her. At first she had been a bit overconfident, believing that her skills in martial arts protected her against attacks no matter how strong, but she had not realized that the other party did not need strength at all, but rather had only to target and distract her mind and spirit. Because she could not control the consequences of these happenings, without evidence, the entire event would descend into hearsay, and then not even the Emperor might believe that someone could have forced her into acting against her will. Thus, the most important thing now was to leave this place as soon as possible.

“My lady, Nihuang has suddenly remembered an urgent task elsewhere. I will first take my leave.” After this hurried statement, Princess Nihuang turned to leave.

“Princess...” Sima Lei started to reach for her, then halted with his hand half-raised and turned to look at the Crown Prince, who was glaring at him meaningfully. He gritted his teeth, plucked up his courage, and grabbed Princess Nihuang by the arm.

“How dare you!” Nihuang turned and gathered her inner energy, preparing to shove off the hand on her arm, but as their eyes met, her mind once again became distracted and dazed, and the scalding hand on her arm seemed to glow with warmth, the kind of warmth she longed for every time she stood alone on the frozen battlefield, frost and wind whipping all around her.

“Sima, the Princess seems tired. Why don’t you take her away for a rest...” Noble Consort Yue’s voice drifted over from a distance, cool as shade.

The Crown Prince took a few steps back, watching as Sima Lei

held the Princess tightly by the waist, watching as a conflicted turmoil of pain and tenderness flitted across the beautiful face. Perhaps his heart was a little disturbed, as he turned his face away.

Suddenly, shouts and sounds of conflict rose up from outside.

Noble Consort Yue stood up abruptly, and climbed the steps for a clearer view. She was able to see a figure rapidly approaching, shoving aside all who tried to block his path and leaving behind a pitiful mess of entangled limbs. Not only could no one stop him, he actually dodged aside and charged straight for Sima Lei.

Although Prince Jing rarely showed his skills, his martial arts were certainly not as rough as might be imagined by those who had never experienced battle personally. Sima Lei was already feeling guilty, and didn't quite dare raise a hand against a prince, and anyway his martial arts weren't very strong in the first place, and so he hurriedly backed away, and was forced to retreat quite a distance.

“Jingyan! You are truly daring! How dare you enter my Zhaoren Palace without permission?” Noble Consort Yue was by now sure that Prince Jing had come alone, and immediately came forward in a fury. “Injuring people left and right – are you trying to start a rebellion?”

Prince Jing took in the scene at a glance and noticed the Princess' clouded gaze and swaying figure, and although he did not know what exactly had happened, he understood enough. Thoroughly disgusted with Noble Consort Yue's actions, he didn't even want to bother arguing with her, but simply went over to the Princess, pressed hard against several of her [vital meridian points](#), and lifted her over his shoulder.

The Crown Prince, filled with fear and fury, shouted for his men to surround Xiao Jingyan, forming two circles around him, the inner bearing swords and the outer holding bows and arrows.

“Jingyan, you dare to trespass into Mother's palace to kidnap the

Princess! How fortunate that I am here to protect her! Put down the Princess right now, and for the sake of the ties of our blood, I will not report you to Father Emperor...”

Xiao Jingyan gave him a cold look, then ignored him and continued striding forward. The guards surrounding him helplessly moved with him, sending questioning glances at the Crown Prince.

[Xiao Jingxuan](#) was trapped between a rock and a hard place. This brother of his was a veteran of many battles, and couldn't be stopped by normal shows of power like these. But to shoot a prince to death within the Zhaoren palace was also no small sin, not to mention the Princess Nihuang he was carrying on his back – were they to shoot her too? But if they didn't stop him and let him charge his way out, the situation would become messy all the same. Left without a foolproof solution, he helplessly turned his gaze to his mother.

Noble Consort Yue's radiant red lips pursed, and she spoke one word through her gritted teeth, “Fire.”

“Mother!”

“Fire!” Noble Consort Yue's voice was low, her tone severe. “At the very least, the dead cannot speak, and only then would we have the chance to speak!”

The Crown Prince shivered, then stepped forward and cried in a loud voice, “Prince Jing has trespassed into the palace, attempted to assassinate my Mother Consort, and harmed the Princess! Shoot to kill!”

The guards hesitated for a moment, but as the Crown Prince was their master, they strung their bows and instantly, the arrows fell like rain.

Prince Jing lunged forward and flipped a guard over as he grabbed the guard's only sword, and then, with the light dancing

off his sword like snow, he fended off the first wave of arrows. In the brief interlude that followed, he fought his way to the steps and laid the Princess down on the floor before knocking aside the second wave of arrows. Suddenly, he tumbled through the air, feinting left and right, and scattered the archers' formation. The swordsmen were also not his match, and in the confusion of the fight, only saw a figure flying through the air. The dazed Crown Prince abruptly felt a touch of ice kiss his neck, and found that a cold blade had been pressed against his neck, icy cold against his skin.

“Stop!” Prince Jing’s voice was not loud, but the entire hall had frozen in response.

Noble Consort Yue was trembling all over, and spoke through teeth gritted in fury. “Xiao Jingyan, you dare...”

“Killing a commander amongst his soldiers is something I do often.” Prince Jing smiled coldly, his tone like ice. “His Highness the Crown Prince was standing a bit too close to me.”

“Jingyan! What are you trying to do?” The Crown Prince’s voice was shaking.

“Bring the Princess over to me, then let the two of us leave the palace.”

Noble Consort Yue’s eyes were cold as frost. She scoffed and said, “And if I say no? Would you really dare to kill the Crown Prince?”

“Is my lady consort using the Crown Prince to gamble with me?” Xiao Jingyan’s voice held not a shred of warmth, and the Crown Prince’s heart raced, and he couldn’t help letting out a cry, “Mother!”

Noble Consort Yue’s face was icy to behold, but her chest was heaving, showing that she was in furious thought. Just as her brows furrowed and she opened her mouth to speak, an urgent shout was heard from the palace’s outer gates: “Announcing the

Grand Empress Dowager!”

Noble Consort Yue’s heart froze, and a sense of hopelessness threatened to overwhelm her. But she closed her eyes briefly, and then rapidly came to a decision. Her first words were directed in a rush towards Sima Lei. “Leave the palace by the back doors immediately, and remember, you have not stepped half a foot into Zhaoren palace today!”

Sima Lei froze for a second and looked around blankly before shaking himself and rushing away towards the back door.

“Jingyan,” Noble Consort Yue hurriedly descended the stairs, speaking rapidly. “Listen – the Crown Prince didn’t shoot at you today, and you didn’t put a sword to his neck, understood?”

Prince Jing’s eyes were drawn. He didn’t answer.

“Raising your sword against the Crown Prince and shooting at a prince are both things the Emperor would not want to hear about. I do not wish for the two of you to fall to the same end. As for the other things, let us each fend for ourselves, and we will let the Emperor be the judge.” Noble Consort Yue smiled coolly. “You are an intelligent person; you should know that this is an arrangement that benefits you. Why not take it?”

Prince Jing’s face did not change, but the sword in his grip slowly eased away from the Crown Prince’s neck, and dropped lightly to the ground.

The aged figure of the Grand Empress Dowager appeared now at the Moon Door of the palace’s inner gates, and standing beside her was not only a very confused Princess Jingning, but also another woman, dressed in a royal yellow robe with a grand air and beautiful face.

This was the mistress of Zhengyang palace – the current Empress.

the Capital

Marquis Yan, being the brother of Empress Yan, holds the title 'Imperial Uncle' (where the word uncle refers specifically to the older brother of one's mother – because the Empress is the 'Imperial Mother' of the royal princes)

di means 'little brother'; referring to Mu Qing

i.e. acupuncture points

the Crown Prince

Chapter 29: Skillful Words And Self-Defense

“What have you brought me here to see?” The Grand Empress Dowager looked around the courtyard in confusion. “Why are there so many people here?”

Noble Consort Yue hurriedly indicated for the Crown Prince to dismiss the crowd of guards in the courtyard, and then quickly stepped up and knelt on the floor in a bow. “Your servant consort greets the Grand Empress Dowager, my lady Empress. I had not noticed my ladies’ arrival; please forgive my discourtesy...”

Empress Yan didn’t wait for her to finish, but immediately asked coldly, “Is that Nihuang I see sitting over there? What happened to her?”

Noble Consort Yue saw from the corner of her eye that Prince Jing had gone over to Nihuang and gently helped her up. The Princess’ cheeks were flushed, and both her eyes were closed. There was no denying that something had happened, so she was forced to say, “The Princess was invited over to dine today, but I did not expect the wine to be too strong for her. Nihuang is drunk...”

“Princess Nihuang is a valiant hero among women; her wine tolerance is not weak. How could she become drunk so easily?”

“Your servant consort thought it was strange too.” There as a smile on Noble Consort Yue’s face. “Perhaps her mind has been disturbed these last few days over this issue of choosing a husband.”

“Then why was the courtyard full of guards? Are you telling me someone dared to misbehave in Zhaoren palace? Tell me, and I will be the judge of the situation for you.”

“Oh, the guards...” Noble Consort Yue chuckled gently. “The Crown Prince was having them demonstrate some sword training

that they had mastered for me, almost like a dance.”

Empress Yan gazed at her steadily, and suddenly sneered, “Noble Consort Yue must be joking. You left a guest as honoured as Princess Nihuang drunk on the steps while you and your son stood around watching some sword demonstration... You may answer me with this story, but is this how you are going to answer His Majesty?”

“As for how to answer His Majesty, this is my own business; how could I dare to trouble my lady Empress on my account?” Noble Consort Yue gently retorted. Seeing his mother so unperturbed, the Crown Prince, who had been pale with fear, now walked over slowly to greet the Grand Empress Dowager.

The Grand Empress Dowager had been listening to the verbal sparring between the Empress and the noble consort with much interest, and now seeing the Crown Prince bow to her, immediately reached out a loving hand to caress his head. “Xuan’er, who are those two children over there? They are too far away, I can’t see clearly....”

“...uhh...” The Crown Prince stammered awkwardly, “That’s Jingyan...and Princess Nihuang....”

“Why don’t they come over here to Great Grandmother?”

“Don’t worry, Grand Empress.” Empress Yan’s tone was soft, but her words were like ice. “Nihuang is only drunk; she will wake sooner or later. And once she wakes, I will be certain to advise her never again to drink such strong wine”

Noble Consort Yue felt something clench in her chest, but she gritted her teeth and kept her face smooth. This was indeed the most difficult part of the whole situation. The attempted murder had been balanced by Prince Jing’s taking the Crown Prince hostage, and both parties had basically reached an agreement not to investigate each other further. Sima Lei had also left, and the Empress had not been able to find any evidence of the crime, so no

matter what she said before the Emperor, in the end it would only be one set of words against another, and there were ways to deal with words. But the Princess' mouth, now there was something that could not be stifled. Now her only hope was that the Princess' pride would make her unwilling to make public such a disgraceful event, for fear of its damage to her stainless reputation.

Princess Jingning had by now run to Princess Nihuang's side, and, worried by her flushed appearance, said quietly, "What happened? She's in such a drunken state, let's take her to my palace to rest for awhile."

Prince Jing also felt that it would be more convenient for his sister to take care of the Princess, and so he nodded, ordered a soft palanquin to be brought, and with the Empress' permission, left with Jingning to escort Nihuang away.

The Empress knew that this matter would achieve a greater result if handled by Nihuang rather than by herself, and so didn't press the matter, but simply escorted the Grand Empress Dowager into the main hall of Zhaoren palace, idly chatting and laughing. Noble Consort Yue was forced to keep them company instead of rushing first to the Emperor with her side of the story, and also was left with no chance to further collude with the Crown Prince. Seeing the forced smiles of both mother and son, the Empress felt a deep satisfaction.

Once Princess Nihuang had been carried to Princess Jingning's Yinxiao Pavilion in her palace, Prince Jing immediately summoned a number of imperial physicians. After seeing their patient, they all concluded that the Princess was only suffering from a rapid pulse and shallow breath, with an impaired blood flow, but that there was no serious obstruction and no danger to her life. Prince Jing was thus relieved, and was just gathering his strength to help dissolve the obstructions by pressing her acupuncture points, when the Princess suddenly opened her eyes and shook her head at him, so he stopped, and instructed his sister to look after her well

before he left the hall to sit quietly on the long bench in the courtyard, both waiting and standing guard.

Around an hour later, Princess Jingning ran out and panted, “Yan ge, jiejie just opened her eyes and asked for you.”

Prince Jing stood up hurriedly and walked quickly into the hall to see Nihuang indeed looking much improved, finally let out a sigh of relief, and came forward to perform acupuncture for her.

The Princess sat up slowly, her eyes cool as frost, seeming to be deep in thought, and then raised her head to look Prince Jing in the eye, saying softly, “Thank you.”

Prince Jing only nodded slightly and didn’t answer. Instead, it was Princess Jingning who asked with concern, “Nihuang jiejie, how much did you drink to become this drunk? Just now, I shook you for a long time, but you didn’t seem to notice me....”

“I’m alright now.” Nihuang reached out to brush Jingning’s cheek lightly, then put on her shoes and stood up.

“Where is jiejie going?”

“To see His Majesty.”

Prince Jing was startled, and asked quietly, “Has the Princess already decided?”

“In truth, this is not anything shameful,” Nihuang’s smile was cold as ice. “Perhaps the noble consort hopes that I will hide my anger and my tongue to cover up such a humiliation. If so, she has judged Nihuang wrongly. To say nothing of the fact that she failed, even if she had succeeded, if she thinks I would submit docilely to her because of that, then she must be dreaming. It is utterly impossible.”

“His Majesty should be in Yangju Hall. Since the Princess has decided, then I will escort you there.” Prince Jing spoke calmly, without adding any other comment.

“There’s no need to trouble yourself. I’m really....”

“This is not Yunnan. It is better to be cautious.”

Nihuang understood his good intentions, and didn’t continue to decline, but nodded in assent. Princess Jingning looked from one to the other and finally couldn’t stand it. “What are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

“I’ll explain later.” Nihuang smiled at her. “I’m not in a good mood right now, and I don’t want to say any more before going to see His Majesty. Jingning, forgive me.”

“Why is jiejie is being so polite...” Jingning was a bit embarrassed. “Then, shall I accompany the two of you?”

“No,” Prince Jing responded immediately. “You should not get involved with this kind of situation. Wait here, and don’t go around listening to nonsense, understand?” Jingning wasn’t so innocent that she truly understood nothing. Seeing their somber expressions, and thinking about everything that she had seen that day, she knew the situation wasn’t anything simple, and didn’t ask any further, only nodding obediently.

After leaving Yinxiao Pavilion, the two walked along in silence, seeming not to see the palace servants bowing on either side, until they reached Yangju Hall, where they stopped to be announced.

On hearing that these two were seeking audience, the Emperor was a little shocked, and hurriedly allowed them to enter. He took in the Princess’ expression at a glance, and a suspicion arose in his heart. As soon as they had made their bows, he immediately asked, “Nihuang, what is it? Who has upset you?”

Nihuang knelt down in a bow, and raised her head to speak. “Pray His Majesty judge for Nihuang.”

“Aiya, rise, quickly rise, tell us what’s wrong....”

Nihuang knelt unmoving, but fixed her eyes on the Emperor and said, “Noble Consort Yue summoned me to Zhaoren palace today

under the guise of reminiscing about our home land, but served tainted wine that disturbed my mind and spirit. The Crown Prince seized the opportunity to bring Sima Lei into the Inner Palace to initiate inappropriate behaviour, in order to force me to wed. I pray His Majesty investigate these events, and give justice to Nihuang.”

Her words were deceptively simple and clear, without any suggestion of argument, and thus were all the more horrifying. The Emperor, shaking with fury, shouted in one breath, “Call for the noble consort and the Crown Prince! Bring them immediately to Yangju Hall!”

This order was carried out remarkably quickly, and soon, not only had those who were suppose to arrive, arrived, some who weren’t supposed to come had also arrived. Aside from the summoned Noble Consort Yue and Crown Prince, the Empress and Prince Yu had also appeared together.

“Consort Yue! Crown Prince! Do you confess to your crime?!” The Emperor shouted out in fury before they had even finished making their bows.

Noble Consort Yue’s face showed amazement, and she said fearfully, “Your servant consort does not know what has angered Your Majesty; pray Your Majesty explain.”

“You still feign ignorance?” The Emperor struck the table with his hand. “What did you do to Nihuang today? Tell us!”

“Princess Nihuang?” Noble Consort Yue’s face showed even more astonishment. “I invited her to dine today, and the Princess couldn’t stand the strength of the wine and slowly became drunk. The Crown Prince and I were just caring for her when the Empress suddenly arrived with the Grand Empress Dowager, and ordered Princess Jingning to take the Princess away to rest.... As for what happened afterwards, your servant does not know. Perhaps the Princess feels neglected because my hospitality was not adequate?”

Seeing her dodge the blame so neatly, Princess Nihuang couldn't help laughing coldly. "Your wine must be very strong indeed; why, only one cup was enough to render me unconscious. Does such a wine exist? Not to mention as soon as I drank this cup, the Crown Prince brought in Sima Lei. Was that a coincidence too?"

"That wine was the Seven Mile Fragrance gifted by His Majesty. Although it is quite strong, only the Princess has said that drinking it made her unconscious. His Majesty can search your servant's palace; there is certainly no other wine. And I fear the Princess must have already been drunk, because it was only the Crown Prince who entered. Where did Sima Lei come from? His Majesty has only to find anyone in Zhaoren palace, and ask if there was a second person who saw Sima Lei there."

Princess Nihuang raised an eyebrow and said furiously, "Everyone in Zhaoren palace is yours. If you deny it, who would dare contradict you?"

Noble Consort Yue didn't confront her directly, but continued to speak facing the Emperor. "Although everyone in Zhaoren palace is under your servant, everyone under your servant is Your Majesty's servant. Under an imperial order, who would dare to lie to His Majesty?"

Seeing her deft maneuvering and irrefutable words, the Empress couldn't contain her anger, and scolded, "You truly have an eloquent tongue. You dare to act but you don't dare to admit to your actions? But no matter how you dodge, you cannot hide the truth. Are you claiming that the Princess is framing you without reason?"

Noble Consort Yue said calmly, "I also don't understand why the Princess would make up such a story without any reason, just as I don't understand why my lady Empress immediately believed the Princess without any evidence, and refuses to believe me...."

Empress Yan felt a chill in her heart, and suddenly understood

what she had done wrong.

She should have been a bystander from beginning to end, and not spoken up.

If this was Nihuang's accusation against the noble consort, the Emperor would not believe that Nihuang had any other motive, or that she would use her reputation to frame the noble consort. But once she herself entered into the conflict to protect Nihuang, then suddenly, it became an argument between the two palaces, which was certain to raise the doubts of the easily suspicious Emperor.

Noble Consort Yue, seeing the Emperor beginning to frown in thought, continued gently, "And I would like to ask my lady Empress to bear witness, after the Princess became drunk, and my lady Empress entered the courtyard of the Zhaoren palace so suddenly with the Grand Empress Dowager, did my lady see anyone mistreating the Princess? And although it would not be proper to disturb the Grand Empress Dowager in her old age, Princess Jingning was there as well. Your Majesty can ask her whether she saw anyone mistreating the Princess."

Nihuang had not expected this noble consort to be so nimble with her tongue. Rage rose within her and she burst out, "That's because they came just in time, and you could not carry out the rest of your malicious plan...."

Noble Consort Yue turned and met that blazing glare unflinchingly, saying peacefully, "If the Princess persists in believing that I harbour such malicious intent, then I will not continue arguing. The Princess has chosen my lady Empress and Prince Yu rather than me and the Crown Prince; this must be due to some moral deficit on our part, and we do not dare harbour any resentment towards her. But I must ask the Princess: if, as you say, you fell into my trap, then have you been harmed? And if I had really laboured to create such a malicious plot, then why would my lady Empress have entered at just the right moment to rescue you?"

The Emperor's brow furrowed, and he glanced at the Empress and Prince Yu out of the corner of his eye, as if shaken by these words.

Princess Nihuang felt her hands grow cold with fury. Thousands of enemy soldiers met on the battlefield could not infuriate her as bitterly as this palace consort. She was just about to curse in rage and leave, when a steady voice spoke from beside her: "Father, your son can bear witness, when I entered Zhaoren palace, Sima Lei was indeed beside the Princess, and was certainly behaving with impropriety."

Noble Consort Yue's whole body trembled as she turned, incredulous, to glare at Xiao Jingyan.

"I saw that the situation was desperate, and had to break courtesy in order to bring out the Princess." Prince Jing ignored her, and continued with composure. "In order to stop me, the noble consort and the Crown Prince actually ordered their guards to fire on us. I had no choice but to take the Crown Prince hostage for protection, in order to preserve my life, and to delay until the Grand Empress Dowager arrived. I know that raising a blade against the Crown Prince is no small crime, but I will not allow the truth to remain hidden from my Father Emperor only to avoid punishment for myself. Pray my Father Emperor consider, if not to hide their guilt and sins, why would the Crown Prince have wanted to silence me by killing me?"

Even the Empress and Prince Yu were not aware of these events, and everyone was shocked for a moment. Noble Consort Yue had never expected Xiao Jingyan to have this kind of boldness, and was stunned into silence, her face pale as snow.

"Consort Yue! Did such a thing happen?" The Emperor's fury was frightening to behold.

Noble Consort Yue bit her lip, raised her head, and said, "Since my lady Empress, the Princess, and Prince Jing have all

condemned me by their words, I dare not argue any further, and dare not ask for any evidence. I only pray Your Majesty to judge with his wisdom, and if His Majesty also believes that I have committed this crime, then we, mother and son, will confess, and never dare to harbour any further resentment.”

Faced with her show of submission, the Emperor hesitated. If he didn't believe the claim, he would face the accusations of everyone present. But if he believed it, he couldn't help thinking that they were acting too much in unison. As he hesitated, his thoughts warring in his mind, a eunuch's voice called from outside the hall: “Your Majesty, Commander Meng requests an audience.”

The Emperor was currently dealing with an issue of this importance; he didn't want to be disturbed, and so waved an arm and said, “We will see him later.”

The eunuch bowed and retired, but reappeared a moment later to say, “Your Majesty, Commander Meng has ordered your servant to convey a message. He says he has apprehended an intruder, one Sima Lei, outside the Zhaoren palace, and awaits Your Majesty's further instruction.”

Chapter 30: Committing Crimes

When these words were spoken, shock rippled through the hall. But as the initial astonishment faded, different expressions appeared on different faces.

Noble Consort Yue's face was stretched tightly, the Crown Prince's colour was like dust, Prince Jing and the Princess looked thoughtful, the Empress and Prince Yu looked to be hiding their glee, and as for the Emperor high up on his throne, his face was clouded, betraying complex emotions.

After a silence so long it was almost suffocating, the Emperor waved a heavy hand, signalling for the eunuch to leave.

"Consort Yue...do you have anything else to say?" Unlike his previous severe tone, this sentence was spoken with unusual gentleness and fatigue, but to those listening, it was for this reason all the more chilling.

Noble Consort Yue's radiant make up could no longer hide the pallor beneath, and after turning to look at her beloved son, she rushed forward and fell before the throne, grabbing onto the Emperor's leg and crying with a trembling voice, "Wronged!"

"Even now, you insist you were wronged?"

"Your servant knows she was not wronged," Noble Consort Yue raised her head, eyes brimming with tears, her expression touchingly mournful. "But the Crown Prince was wronged!"

"What are you saying?"

"All of this was your servant's plan, all arranged by your servant. The Crown Prince knew nothing...I lied to him saying I wanted to have a look at Sima Lei, so he brought Sima Lei into the palace, but he was only following his mother's orders. Your Majesty knows Xuan'er has always been a filial son, not only towards your servant, but towards Your Majesty as well!"

“If the Crown Prince is truly innocent, then why has he not uttered a word of argument since we summoned you to this hall?”

“What does Your Majesty want Xuan’er to say? Would you ask him to cast all the blame onto his own mother in front of so many people? Xuan’er is filial and pure by nature, he could not do such a thing! It is because he doesn’t know how to protect himself, and always carelessly falls into the traps of others intending to do him harm, that I have done all of this, in order that he might have more people by his side to support him, so that he would not be so easily deceived in the future....”

“Nonsense!” The Emperor was suddenly furious, and knocked Noble Consort Yue to the floor with one strike. “The Crown Prince is the heir to the throne; who would plot against him? As his mother, you were supposed to teach him to act morally, to perform his duty diligently, to share his father’s burdens above him, and to be a model for the people below him – that would truly be for his good! But now look at what you’ve done? You actually dared to use such base, despicable methods? If Nihuang was harmed in any way today, you could not have been redeemed with a hundred deaths! Even the Crown Prince’s honoured position would have been threatened because of you! What incredible stupidity, incredible stupidity!”

This scolding speech was like a thunderclap of imperial power, enough to strike fear into hearts and cause the soul to scatter. But upon hearing this ferocious scolding, Nihuang’s face showed a bitter smile instead, and the Empress and Prince Yu looked disappointed.

Because, no matter how fierce his scolding, in the end, he was only scolding Noble Consort Yue, and his last few words had already shown that he intended to direct the blame away from the Crown Prince. In this kind of situation, whether the Emperor truly believed the Crown Prince to be innocent was not important; what was important was that, with the crimes of ‘plotting and assisting

his mother in trapping the Princess, and attempting to silence his brother by murder' before the Crown Prince, the fitting punishment for crimes of such immorality, injustice, and impiety would likely endanger his honoured position. And the Emperor did not want to depose the Crown Prince because of these events, and risk disturbing the current, relatively peaceful palace environment. So, with Noble Consort Yue's confession, he had an opportunity he could take advantage of.

After this episode of scolding, the Emperor let out a breath, and didn't go on to immediately lay out Noble Consort Yue's punishment, but instead summoned Meng Zhi.

A moment later, Meng Zhi entered the hall and bowed. The Emperor asked him a few questions about how he had captured Sima Lei, and Meng Zhi replied that his soldiers had come across him on their routine patrols, and had only discovered after apprehending him that he was the noble son of Wei, and so, not daring to handle the matter themselves, had brought it before His Majesty for further instruction. The Emperor did not hear anything unusual in his report, and only reflected that the best laid plans of men could not stand against Heaven's interference, and let out a sigh before asking, "Where is Sima Lei now?"

"He is currently being held in the courtyard where the guards take their rest, watched over by some of my people."

The Emperor made a noise of affirmation, and thinking that this case pertained to the Princess' reputation and should not be handled by the courts, ordered one of the guards to bring the man over so he could personally interrogate him. The guard was gone for a long while, then hurried back fearfully to report, "Sima Lei has been beaten badly; his face is swollen all over and he is currently unconscious. He is not fit to see Your Majesty."

The Emperor raised an eyebrow, and sternly fixed his gaze on Meng Zhi. The Commander of the Imperial Guard looked blank for a moment, then said, "Impossible. My men would not hit prisoners

without permission.”

“No,” the guard hurriedly spoke up. “It wasn’t the imperial guards who beat him up, it was...was...”

“Hurry up and say it!”

“It was the little Lord Mu, who somehow heard something and came charging in. The guards couldn’t stop him, and he personally punched and kicked Sima Lei, and even broke one of his arms....”

The Emperor let out an “Oh,” and glanced over at Nihuang to see her response. In fact, it was a crime for Mu Qing to charge into the courtyard for personal revenge against the accused before he had been convicted. But when the Emperor looked over, the Lady Commander of the Southern Border was still sitting expressionlessly, unmoving, not even standing to say anything in defense of her brother, such as “Pray His Majesty forgive my brother’s recklessness”. The Emperor was a bit embarrassed, and turned to scold the guard, “If it’s broken, then it’s broken, don’t bother us with unimportant details. Dismissed!” After saying this, he again cast his gaze over, but Princess Nihuang still sat with a cold expression, without any hint of intending to thank His Majesty. This fierce, unyielding nature was rare even in men, and, rather than upsetting the Emperor, instead stirred up admiration in his heart, and he silently praised her strength.

Even if Sima Lei could not be interrogated, he was easily dealt with, and interrogation or no interrogation, it didn’t make much of a difference. When the Emperor hurriedly sentenced him to exile for the crime of trespassing into forbidden areas, and demoted his father, the noble Sima Wei, in further punishment, no one expressed any sign of protest.

But the matter of Noble Consort Yue was much more difficult. This woman had entered the palace in her youth, and thanks to the Emperor’s heavy favour over the years, her status had become second only to the Empress, and moreover, she was the Crown

Prince's birth mother. He could not quite bear to punish her too heavily, but if he punished too lightly, the Princess would be bitter. Not to mention with so many looking on, he could not avoid considering the problem of 'fairness'. As he was deliberating, the Crown Prince fell to the floor, crying, "Your son is willing to repay the Princess on behalf of my mother's crimes. Pray Father Emperor consider Mother's many years of loyal service, and deal with her lightly...."

"You evil creature!" The Emperor lifted a leg and kicked the Crown Prince away. "Your mother has resorted to such disgusting methods, why did you not stop her? Where is your filial piety?"

Crying loudly, the Crown Prince crawled forward and wrapped his arms around the Emperor's leg, his face filled with tears.

Lowering his head to look at the person sprawled over his knee, the Emperor's gaze suddenly blurred, and a crushing sensation arose in his chest, pain twisting within him.

A figure he had purposefully chosen to forget for many years drifted now into his mind: that tall, straight posture; that clear face; that arrogant, unyielding expression; and that fierce gaze, eyes burning as if lit by blazing flames.

If that person had been willing to fall prostrate at his knee, crying like Jingxuan was doing now, would the Emperor's heart have softened, and would he have drawn him anew into his embrace?

But time flows like water, and what has gone cannot come again. Perhaps he was becoming soft in his old age, to be suddenly realizing that the harsh punishment he had dealt out so long ago had not only destroyed others, but had also likewise become a hidden wound over his own heart, one that no one else could see.

The Emperor's shaking hand finally came to a rest on the back of the Crown Prince's head. Noble Consort Yue, relieved, supported herself with one arm as she fell gently to one side.

“The lady Yue has behaved immorally, her actions despicable, and violated palace rules. From this day forward, she is stripped of her status as noble consort and degraded to imperial concubine, and is likewise stripped of all noble titles, and will be relocated and confined to Qingli Courtyard, which she may not leave without imperial permission.” The Emperor pronounced each word slowly, and finally turned his gaze to the Empress. “Does the Empress have anything to say about this arrangement?”

If the Empress had her way, she would of course have preferred to see this woman confined to the Secluded Court. But she was an intelligent person and knew that, as the Crown Prince had been spared, the Emperor could not punish his birth mother too harshly, and so, as nothing she said now would achieve anything, she chose to keep quiet.

Seeing the Empress silently lower her eyes, the Emperor turned his gaze to Nihuang and asked, “Does the Princess have any protest?”

The reason Nihuang had brought this matter to the Emperor was only to obtain justice for herself, and she understood in her heart that the Crown Prince could not be deposed over the events of this day. Now, although the Emperor had covered up some of the details, he had nonetheless punished the Crown Prince’s birth mother, a first-rank noble consort, for her sake, and his effort was sincere. If she still showed dissatisfaction now, then she would be lowering herself to their level, and so she said nothing, and only shook her head.

“As for you,” the Emperor eyed the Crown Prince disdainfully. “You will be confined to the Eastern Palace for three months to study hard and reflect on the morals befitting the heir to the throne. If you are involved in such things again in the future, we will not be so generous again!”

“Your son...obeys His Majesty’s merciful edict....”

“Rise then.” The Emperor’s face cleared, and he raised his head, his piercing gaze sweeping through the hall and coming to a rest on Prince Jing.

“Jingyan...”

“Your son is present.”

“Do you admit your crime?”

Prince Jing swept aside his robe and knelt stoically. “Your son admits his crime.”

The Emperor scoffed coldly, then said, “Tell us, how did you know the Princess was in danger, to enter at just the right moment to rescue her?”

Prince Jing had been considering his answer to this question the entire time, but now that the moment had arrived, he still had not thought of a suitable answer, and hesitated. He had arrived to rescue the Princess because Mei Changsu had asked him to go, but he himself had no idea how Mei Changsu had known that the Princess was in danger, and so didn’t dare to rashly drag him into the mess.

“What is it? You can’t answer?” The Emperor had waited long enough, and his tone became severe.

“No...I...it was because....”

“Your Majesty,” a steady voice suddenly rose up. “It was I who asked Prince Jing to go.”

“You?” The Emperor raised an eyebrow. “And how did you come to know about this?”

“It was like this.” Prince Yu stepped forward and continued respectfully, “Your son had entered the palace by the Puqing gate to greet my mother Empress, and was passing by Zhaoren palace when I saw one of the Princess’ palace servants running out in fear and begging for help, saying that something was going wrong

inside. I knew that this was no small matter, and that even if I ended up accused of wronging a noble consort, I could not let my hesitation cause danger to the Princess. But I knew my martial skills were too poor to enter the palace without being stopped and further delayed. Fortunately, Prince Jing walked by at that moment, and I asked him to enter first to secure the situation, while I went to find the Empress. Prince Jing has an upright heart towards helping others, and instantly agreed, but I never thought that the Noble Consort...no, that the lady Concubine Yue would act in such a deranged manner and actually order a prince to be silenced by murder, and so lead to the resulting events. Although it was not my intention for Prince Jing to take up arms against the Crown Prince, he was nonetheless involved in the situation under my orders. If my father Emperor must punish him, then I am willing to share the punishment.”

He spoke with assurance and composure, as if there was not the slightest flaw in his logic. Of course, Consort Yue and the Crown Prince were well aware that Prince Jing arriving because of a servant girl calling for help was simply impossible given the timing of the events, but neither had any remaining right to speak, not to mention arguing over such details could not change anything, and so they did not open their mouths. The Emperor was sure that Prince Yu’s intentions were not as noble as he claimed, and that likely he had been delighted on discovering information he could use against the Crown Prince, but he nonetheless believed this explanation, and nodded. “So that was how it happened. But, for the crime of threatening the Crown Prince’s esteemed person, according to the law, Jingyan should be severely punished.”

Princess Nihuang’s face discoloured in anger, and the Emperor continued, “But on reflection, the situation was not without provocation, and Prince Yu has expressed his willingness to share in the responsibility, and besides, you have expended no small effort in rescuing the Princess, so we will neither reward nor punish you. Prince Yu was acute and perceptive, and was able to

notice these events and halt their progression, which pleases us greatly. We hereby reward him one hundred bolts of brocade, one thousand pieces of gold, and bestow one royal pearl, in reward for his work.”

“Your son thanks His Majesty for his great mercy.”

“We are tired. You may all leave.”

The Emperor closed his eyes tiredly and leaned wearily back against his cushions. No one in the hall dared to speak further, and all quietly left.

Empress Yan was naturally responsible for the punishment of Consort Yue, and the Crown Prince stood by helplessly as his mother was led away to the Inner Palace, while he himself could only glare hatefully at Prince Yu.

Prince Yu, who had not stepped in until the end, had nonetheless emerged as the greatest victor: he had simply appeared and had received the Emperor’s rewards, he had openly defended Prince Jing and so now Prince Jing owed him a great favour, and from claiming the responsibility for the Princess’ rescue had now even become the great saviour of the Yunnan Mu clan. The only downside was that he had directed all of the Crown Prince’s wrath upon himself, and further deepened the hatred between the two. But he and the Crown Prince had long been at odds, and both harboured a fight-to-the-death kind of attitude, and so this one more offense did not add up to much, and therefore really, he had reaped rich rewards with hardly any loss. His heart was joyful as he silently admired the qilin prodigy’s insight. It was fortunate that he had come across him while he was hurrying into the palace at the Empress’ notice, and it was fortunate that he had, out of respect for his wisdom, explained the situation and asked for his advice. Otherwise, without his help, he would never have thought to use the opportunity of protecting Prince Jing to take responsibility for all of the work. To be honest, Prince Jing was truly bold and daring; it was just too bad that he was too reckless, prone to acting

carelessly, and therefore wasn't a worthy contender. After he had protected him in front of the Emperor this time, he must be feeling grateful. And as for Princess Nihuang, certainly she would be even more...

At this point in his thoughts, Princess Nihuang had already come over to bow and say, smiling, "I am grateful to His Highness Prince Yu for his loyal rescue today. In the future, I will certainly repay you in kind should the opportunity arise."

Prince Yu hurriedly returned the bow and said with a broad smile, "The Princess is too polite. The Princess' rank and status is worthy of any effort I might expend for her person."

A perfect smile floated across Nihuang's features, and she was about to exchange a few more polite words when she saw Prince Jing leaving quietly out of the corner of her eye, and though she was impatient to follow, her face betrayed no trace of her emotions, as she said unhurriedly, "My anger towards Lady Yue knows no bounds, but it would not be proper for me to witness her punishment by my lady Empress. Would Your Highness...."

"The Princess does not need to worry. Leave this matter to me. I will enter the Inner Palace to speak with the Empress immediately. I will not let the Princess down." Prince Yu chuckled for a long moment, then turned and walked swiftly towards the Inner Palace. Princess Nihuang waited until he was a good distance away before running to catch up with Prince Jing.

Hearing Nihuang calling him, Xiao Jingyan stopped and said, "Does the Princess have another matter to discuss?"

"Just now as I was thanking Prince Yu, you really wanted to come over to tell me that it wasn't anything to do with him, right?" Princess Nihuang smiled knowingly. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Prince Jing lowered his head, and didn't reply.

“The real reason you came to rescue me was because of Mister Su, wasn’t it?”

Prince Jing jumped at her words. “How do you know that?”

“Because Mister Su warned me earlier to beware of the methods of the Inner Palace. But he spoke vaguely, and I only kept my guard up around the Empress, and wasn’t careful around Noble Consort Yue....”

Prince Jing frowned, and suddenly a great suspicion arose in his heart as he asked slowly, “He didn’t tell you to beware Noble Consort Yue? But when he asked me to enter the palace, he was very certain about Zhaoren palace?”

“Oh, our conversation at that time was cut short, so perhaps he did not have the chance to tell me.” Princess Nihuang didn’t seem to take this to heart, but continued to smile. “But even though he orchestrated my rescue today, I cannot thank him openly. Instead, I can only thank Prince Yu, and not only thank him with words, but prepare to visit him tomorrow with Qing di to thank him again in person.”

Prince Jing didn’t understand. “Why would you do that? You said you know....”

Nihuang laughed faintly and turned her head towards the Eastern Palace. “Although Consort Yue has been convicted, the Crown Prince is still the Crown Prince, and his power is still great. The more I openly thank Prince Yu, the more the Crown Prince will direct his hatred towards him, and naturally will not trouble you instead. Your current situation is not one that can afford making an enemy of the Crown Prince, so isn’t it better to push Prince Yu out into the open instead?

In fact, it wasn’t that Prince Jing didn’t understand such games of power, but rather that he was unwilling to think about them. With Nihuang’s brief explanation, he instantly understood, and couldn’t help turning away, shaking his head with a sigh. The two

walked out of the palace side by side, and did not continue their previous conversation.

They had just walked out of the Shenwu gate when a great cry of “Jiejie!” was heard, and Mu Qing came charging up to them, only stopping directly in front of Princess Nihuang, shouting, “Jiejie, are you alright? You scared me to death!”

“You are of age now, and still so easily excited? Such a small thing to scare you to death. There are far greater things than this under heaven and earth!” Nihuang spoke scoldingly, but her hand was lovingly rearranging the clothes her little brother had disturbed in his frantic run.

“I was afraid jiejie had suffered some harm,” Mu Qing spoke tenderly. “The palace is not a good place; you should not come here often in the future. Although our residence in Jinling is not as large as the one in Yunnan, it should still be enough for jiejie. Let’s go back quickly.”

Princess Nihuang smiled and patted him gently, then turned back to Prince Jing. “Is his Highness also returning to his residence? We can go back together.”

“There’s no need; I won’t be returning right away.” Xiao Jingyan thought for a moment, and finally said firmly, “I must go first to the residence of the Marquis of Ning.”

Chapter 31: Misinterpretation

When Xiao Jingyan entered the door of the Xie residence, it was Xie Bi who came forward to receive him. The first words out of his mouth were, “Your Highness has come personally? Please come in. Brother Su is at Snow Cottage.”

Prince Jing was slightly taken aback, and asked, “What, Mister Su knew I was coming?”

“Oh, it’s not like that,” Xie Bi smiled. “Brother Su just came by to say hello, and said that His Highness Prince Jing was going to take charge of the three children from the Secluded Court to train them to become his personal guards, and so would be sending someone to collect them soon. I just hadn’t expected Your Highness to come personally.”

Prince Jing let out an “Oh,” and then took his cue from Xie Bi and continued, “I am interested in Mister Su’s methods of teaching swordsmanship, and mainly came to ask him about that, but can take the children away with me while I’m here.”

“Your Highness is known for your brilliant military achievements, so naturally you would be interested in those martial techniques. Now as for me, I wasn’t gifted with that talent.” Xie Bi led the way, talking all the while. The two arrived at the door of Snow Cottage and stood waiting to be announced. Fei Liu appeared immediately and looked at them coldly, his gaze like icy needles, which made Xie Bi very uncomfortable.

“Go in!” The youth said stiffly.

Xie Bi forced a smile, then said to Prince Jing, “It’s better for Brother Su to have quiet while he’s ill. I won’t go in to disturb him. Your Highness, please make yourself at home.”

Prince Jing hadn’t wanted anyone else’s company anyway, and so nodded and entered the small courtyard. Mei Changsu was

already waiting beside the stairs, and aside from the three children lined up behind him, there was no one else present.

“Your Highness,” Mei Changsu bowed, and Tingshen and the others followed suit.

“Please rise,” Prince Jing said coolly. “My carriage is at the gate. The three children can wait for me there.”

On hearing this, Mei Changsu immediately understood that Prince Jing had something he wanted to discuss in private, and ordered Fei Liu to call over a servant of the Xie household, who led Tingshen and the others out, while he invited Prince Jing indoors and served up tea.

“Princess Nihuang’s narrow miss today, do you know about it?” Prince Jing asked coldly, seeming not to see Mei Changsu’s outstretched arm inviting him to sit, but instead remaining standing with his hands behind his back.

“Hasn’t she already been rescued safely?”

“If I had arrived just one step later, the Princess would have already been led deeper into the palace, and then no matter what force I used, I would not have been able to save her. Did you know that?” Prince Jing stepped forward, his tone growing severe.

Since Prince Jing had entered Snow Cottage, Mei Changsu had sensed that he was harbouring some hidden fury, which he had originally thought was leftover anger towards Noble Consort Yue and her son, but now, he was realizing that it was instead being directed towards himself.

“Although there was danger in the process, everything has ended well. Why is Your Highness in such a rage?” Mei Changsu pondered, then suddenly paled. “Unless the Princess became angry after her humiliation...”

“Do you really care about the Princess’ feelings?” Prince Jing laughed coldly. “Warning her in advance to prevent everything

from happening would have been a small favour, but it would not have given Noble Consort Yue and the Crown Prince the chance to commit such a crime, so of course you were not satisfied. Now the result is perfect – I fought desperately to save her, the situation was full of excitement, and the Princess is endlessly grateful to me, so that in the future if any conflict arose, the Yunnan Mu clan would undoubtedly choose to support me. This is everything you hoped for, isn't it?"

Mei Changsu felt palpitations stir in his heart. He turned slowly, and after a long while, said, "Could it be that His Highness believes I purposefully concealed the truth from the Princess, and let everything happen in order to reap the greatest benefit from this plotting?"

"Are you telling me that's not what happened?" Prince Jing fixed his gaze tightly on him. "You knew the events would take place at the Zhaoren palace, and you had an opportunity to warn the Princess beforehand, so why didn't you tell her? You had time to tell her to beware the Empress, but didn't have time to say two more words, 'Consort Yue'?"

Seeing Prince Jing's menacing expression, Mei Changsu's thoughts were scattered. He had honestly never thought Prince Jing would misunderstand him in this way. A person's thoughts were truly deep beyond all fathoming, and you could never really say that you had grasped the mind of another person. Even the most intimate relationship between a father and son could be eroded by rumours and gossip.

The fire of Prince Jing's rage was fueled by Mei Changsu's distracted, indifferent expression, and he took his silence for affirmation of his accusation. When he remembered Princess Nihuang lying fallen on the steps, her face full of pain and shame, he couldn't suppress the fury that rose up in his chest, and he reached forward and grabbed Mei Changsu by the collar, pulling him close, his other arm gripping his shoulder tightly, as if the

heat of his rage could melt the ice-cold skin of the person before him.

“Listen well, Su Zhe,” Xiao Jingyan’s words were spoken through tightly gritted teeth. “I know that you strategists not only act treacherously and shamelessly, but also that not even the most powerful can stand against the cold arrows of your plotting. But I must warn you, since you have accepted me as your liege, you will be clear about my boundaries. Princess Nihuang is not like those who only wallow in power and fight for wealth. She is the commander of a hundred thousand soldiers of the Southern border; she has shouldered the military responsibility of protecting the country. It is the blood she has shed on the battlefield that protects people like you, so that you may scheme and plot safely in this flourishing capital! How could someone like you, who only seeks power and profit, understand the iron blood of a soldier, the hostile smoke of the battlefield? I will not allow you to take people like her as your chess pieces, to use and dispose of as you will. If you do not even know how to respect these veterans who have paid the price on the battlefield with their blood, then I, Xiao Jingyan, will never be associated with you! Do you understand?”

A wave of heat rose in Mei Changsu’s chest, and a hint of a bitter smile lingered at the edges of his mouth. Not understand what it means to be a soldier? Not understand the battlefield? Perhaps, in the snow of that bitter winter twelve years ago, his heart had frozen, and his blood had frozen, but the things that had been burned into his very bones – had they frozen too?

But at this moment, he did not have to think anymore about this, and neither did he have to answer the posed question, because in Mei Changsu’s trembling field of vision, Fei Liu’s furious face had suddenly appeared.

The youth’s palm sliced through the air with murderous intent, trailing cold air in its wake, aimed at Prince Jing’s neck like the scythe of the reaper himself.

“Stop!” As he shouted sternly for Fei Liu to stop, Mei Changsu shoved Prince Jing to one side with all of his strength, putting his own body in front of him as a shield.

Fei Liu’s ferocious slice was descending when Su gege suddenly appeared in the target area of his attack, and, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to take the hit, he was horrified and immediately pulled back with all of his strength, blocking his right arm with his left. But the cold energy of his attack still assaulted Prince Jing’s side and Mei Changsu’s shoulder.

Prince Jing had been through regular endurance training, and his muscles and bones were strong as iron, so this small piece of much reduced cold energy didn’t do much to him, but to Mei Changsu, it felt as if he had been struck with a shower of ice cold needles. There was a sudden sweetness in his throat, and he felt a surge of fresh blood rush into his mouth, which he forced back down doggedly.

“Su gege!” Fei Liu cried loudly.

Mei Changsu ignored the pain in his chest, gathered his composure, and said severely, still standing guard in front of Prince Jing, “Have you forgotten everything I’ve said to you? Have you forgotten that you promised me to never, ever hurt this person, to never touch even one hair on his head?”

“But he...” Although Fei Liu’s face was rigid, his wide eyes were filled with the hurt of a child.

“Don’t argue!” Mei Changsu reprimanded sharply. “What is forbidden is forbidden! Apologize to His Highness Prince Jing!”

Fei Liu’s whole body trembled. He pressed his lips tightly together, his lovely face stretched taut, and twisted away stubbornly.

Prince Jing had not the slightest shred of antipathy towards Fei Liu, and said with a crease in his brow, “You don’t need to force

him.”

“No,” Mei Changsu’s face was like ice. “He must remember this. Fei Liu, are you going to apologize or not?”

Fei Liu rarely received this kind of stern, forceful scolding from Mei Changsu. His face was flushed, his breath heavy, his chest heaving, and his teeth were gritted so hard that the muscles of his face were stretched taut and veins were showing in the skin of his neck. If he had not been trained from childhood to show no expression on his face, he would certainly have been close to tears.

Mei Changsu sighed, his heart softening, and he walked forward slowly and wrapped his hands around Fei Liu’s face, rubbing gently, and said quietly, “Don’t grind your teeth, you’ll get a headache...”

Fei Liu’s lips pursed, then he rushed forward and fell into Mei Changsu’s embrace, wrapping his arms tightly around his waist.

“Alright, alright...” Mei Changsu murmured. “Is Fei Liu going to listen to Su gege?”

“..... listen...”

“Then apologize to His Highness.”

Fei Liu thought for a moment, head bowed, then suddenly raised his head and glared at Prince Jing, saying stiffly, “Him first!”

Prince Jing raised an eyebrow in confusion, but Mei Changsu had already instantly understood Fei Liu’s meaning.

“Don’t speak nonsense. Why would His Highness apologize to you?”

“To you!”

“Not to me neither....”

“He hit you!”

“He did not hit me,” Mei Changsu rubbed his shoulder helplessly.

“He was only a little angry, and drew a bit close to me while speaking....” “He apologize!” Fei Liu insisted.

“I am not going to apologize.” Mei Changsu had not yet answered when Prince Jing unexpectedly spoke up. Xiao Jingyan’s expression was serious as he turned to face Fei Liu. He did not take advantage of the boy’s intellectual disadvantage to tease or deceive him, but instead continued in a solemn voice, “Everything I have said just now was from the bottom of my heart, not one sentence was false or wrong, and so, I will not apologize. But, Su Zhe, neither will I ask this young brother to apologize to me. He was only fulfilling his responsibilities as a bodyguard, and did not do anything wrong. I think, however, that you owe Princess Nihuang an apology.”

Mei Changsu looked at him, deep in thought, and then asked, “Does Princess Nihuang also think I purposefully deceived her?”

Xiao Jingyan was startled. “Actually, no, she thought you were disrupted before you could finish....”

“Then what is the use of apologizing now and frightening her for nothing?” Mei Changsu said indifferently. “The Princess has already suffered much in the capital. Must you add to her grief?”

Prince Jing had not considered this, and stood in a daze.

“I will remember Your Highness’ words well, and I will take care in the future.” Mei Changsu continued, “But I also have a few words for Your Highness. You cannot reject all strategists as one. Against people such as Prince Yu and the Crown Prince, one cannot succeed with only a heart full of passion. Sometimes, we must be ruthless, treacherous, cruel; if we are complacent for even a moment, we will lose everything, with no hope of recovery. You will not fail to understand this point, am I right?”

Xiao Jingyan’s brows were furrowed tightly, but he knew there was truth to these words. He only felt as if his chest were stuffed tightly with something, a disgust and hatred he could not easily

express.

Mei Changsu had been watching the changes in his expression closely, and continued in a cold, hard voice, “Your Highness cannot help feeling uncomfortable on occasion, but you must bear it. I know your boundaries, and I will not cross them. But I also have my own methods and ways of handling matters, and I am afraid Your Highness will have to get used to them slowly. You and I share the same goal, and for the sake of this, is it really too much to ask for us to sacrifice some of our personal feelings?”

Prince Jing raised his head and took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a moment, then slowly opened them again and directed his shining gaze towards Mei Changsu. “This is what you really believe. I understand. I will also share with you this truth: I no longer harbour the slightest trace of brotherly love or affection towards the Crown Prince and Prince Yu. Against them and those who do their will, I do not care what methods you choose to use.”

“Your Highness speaks frankly, to say these words in front of me.”

“Since I am working with you, what is the point of hiding anything? If you truly wanted to do me harm, then simply knowing Tingshen’s secret would have been enough to tie my hands. Although you work in the shadows with poisonous scheming, you are nonetheless truly talented. If I did not have someone like you by my side, then what power would I have against the Crown Prince and Prince Yu? But in all of our Da Liang, and in the royal court, there still remain ministers who are pure of heart, and who have not participated in the fight for the crown, and against them...”

“I must still use them.” Mei Changsu spoke coldly. “But, to the best of my ability, I will not also harm them.”

Prince Jing stared at him steadily, and slowly nodded after a long moment, then said, pronouncing each word carefully, “See that

you remember.”

Mei Changsu smiled faintly, understanding that this day’s discussion had come to an end, and stepped back and bowed. Prince Jing didn’t waste any more words, but turned and strode away towards the courtyard. At the door, he stopped suddenly and said, without turning his head, “Thank you, for saving Tingshen.”

“You’re welcome.” Mei Changsu continued indifferently, “I hope Your Highness will not overindulge him out of pity for his sufferings, but send him into the army for training, that he may learn from an early age the rigors of manhood, and not turn out like me, with a mind filled only with plots and schemes....”

Xiao Jingyan’s figure seemed to freeze for a moment, but in the end, he didn’t reply, and only walked away into the courtyard.

Fei Liu’s furious glare had been fixed on him all along, and even after his shadow had disappeared, he continued to glare in that direction, unwilling to turn away.

“No, Fei Liu.” Mei Changsu took the boy’s hand, and pulled him forcefully into the middle of the room. “Su gege will say it one more time: you are absolutely forbidden to hurt this person, no matter what, do you understand?”

“Understand....”

“Su gege is very upset about what happened today....”

“He’s bad!” Fei Liu sounded hurt. “He hit you.”

“He did not hit me. I would never, ever let him hit me....” Mei Changsu rubbed Fei Liu’s head and said, “If he had hit me, Su gege would be angry. Look at me, do I look angry?”

Fei Liu looked closely, then shook his head.

“To tell you the truth, Su gege is actually very happy.” Mei Changsu smiled and pinched the boy’s cheek. “Really, very happy.”

“Happy...” Fei Liu cocked his head, looking doubtful.

“Because, he still hasn’t changed.” As Mei Changsu spoke, his eyes gradually became misty. “Although he doesn’t speak or laugh much now, although he is not as cheerful or as bright as before, although his heart has been filled with fury and revenge, still, in his bones, he is still that warmhearted Xiao Jingyan, he is still... that good friend, who sometimes bullies me, and is sometimes bullied by me....”

“Su gege....”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Don’t cry!”

“Alright,” Mei Changsu took a breath, still smiling, and used a finger to lightly brush at the corner of his eye. “I won’t cry. After all, we are very happy.”

“Happy!” Fei Liu suddenly forgot his previous troubles and pointed outside. “Sun! Can play!”

“Alright...let’s go play.”

Despite agreeing to play, Mei Changsu only sat on the long bench under the tree, enjoying the weak warmth of the sunshine of an early winter’s afternoon. Fei Liu sat in the shade, playing joyfully with the shadows of the tree branches, and returning periodically to his Su gege’s side for Mei Changsu to mop his sweating forehead with a gentle handkerchief.

Suddenly, it was as if the flow of time had reversed, and he had returned to the careless days of his youth. He was taming horses, bare-chested, on the grasslands, the yellow earth flying by beneath the wild hooves of his horse. Jingyan, standing outside the fence, tossed him a sack of wine, which he caught and upended over his face in one smooth motion. The wine splashed over his chest, and his father came over, smiling, and rubbed at his forehead with his own handkerchief, gently wiping it clean....

“Su gege....” Fei Liu’s clear eyes were wide as he called his name.

“It’s alright,” Mei Changsu replied gently. “The sun is so warm. I’m falling asleep....”

“Then sleep!” Fei Liu jumped up and brought a blanket over, lightly spreading it over Mei Changsu’s body, then curled up beside him, resting his head on his knee.

As the day drew to a close, the entire Snow Cottage suddenly became unusually quiet.

But for Mei Changsu, who had already been sucked into the storms of deceit and deception, as time went on, peaceful moments like these would only become rarer and rarer, and shorter and shorter....

Chapter 32: Troubles

About ten miles west of the capital, there was a stretch of rolling grassland, with a clear, winding brook weaving along its side, and a thick forest on the far shore. Because of its beautiful scenery, well-formed terrain, and close proximity to the palace, it has traditionally been the preferred training ground of the noble sons of the royal household – a place where they practised riding and shooting, and simply enjoyed themselves.

Hoof-beats fell like rain as two riders raced along the riverbank, one in front of the other. They were riding gloriously, as if carved into the saddle, their horsemanship complementing each other beautifully, when suddenly the one in front turned his horse and plunged into the river, waves erupting in his wake and soaking his clothing.

“Jingrui! Are you crazy? It’s winter, get out of there!” The person on the shore shouted, pulling hard on his horse’s reins.

The rider in the water didn’t seem to hear him, letting his horse splash deeper into the river, the water already reaching his horse’s flank.

“Fine!” The person on the shore sounded annoyed. “You’re not coming up? Then I’ll come down, and at worst, catch a cold, and become ill again like before....”

Following these words, the person on the shore plunged forward unhesitatingly, and his companion finally reacted, turning his horse and riding over to stop him. The two rode up the small incline side by side, crested a small hill, and then Xiao Jingrui suddenly threw down his reins and jumped down from his horse, ran forward a few steps, and then fell to the ground, burying his face into the thick grass.

Yan Yujin shook his head and also got off his horse, walking over to kick him gently in the stomach. “Hey, you playing dead?”

The person on the ground didn't make a sound, his raven-black hair falling around him, shielding his face as effectively as the wild grass all around his head.

"Fine, you win." Yan Yujin sat down beside him, absently plucking a stand of grass and sticking it into his mouth. "Haven't you always given off an air of generosity and magnanimity since you were a child? Who doesn't know that the Young Master Xiao is broad-minded and gentle, a rare, modest gentleman? What's this tantrum about, then? Brother Su didn't say much; what's got you so upset?"

Xiao Jingrui flipped over angrily, his face drawn tightly, eyes fixed straight up at the sky.

"So you've tanned your back, and now you're tanning your belly?" Yan Yujin sprawled down beside him, laughing, and tickled his ear with a piece of grass. "Your socks and shoes must be soaked, right? Take them off and tan your feet too."

"Go away, stop bothering me!" Xiao Jingrui pushed his hand away.

Yan Yujin immediately raised an eyebrow. "Hey! Take a good look, it's me, I'm not your punching bag. You've been offended by some other friend, fine, but don't take it out on me. I've never had the habit of being someone's scapegoat!"

Xiao Jingrui turned over, sat up, and glared at him furiously. "What did you say?"

"Am I supposed to be scared when you glare at me?" Yan Yujin glared back, his voice rising. "You're angry because you got snubbed! Ever since Brother Su said to you, 'Jingrui, don't ask any more, this isn't any of your business', you started feeling uncomfortable in your heart, right?"

"I didn't...."

"Now that it's just me, you can stop pretending." Yan Yujin

retorted. "And then, leaving the palace, he didn't want to take the carriage, but said he wanted to walk slowly by himself for a while, to think carefully about some things. You didn't see your expression then.... And then you ran after him, and he rejected you, right? He wasn't being polite, but really rejecting you, clearly saying he didn't want you to follow him, so how can you still not understand?"

"I understand!"

"If you understand, then why are you still angry? At that time, you sounded like such a child: "Then go by yourself, I'm going to play polo." What did you want him to say? Did you really expect him to say, "Jingrui, don't be like that, I'm already ill, and you're going to abandon me to go play?" Come on, how old are you? Brother Su was right when he said you can do whatever you want to do, without telling him first. That was only the truth; you didn't have to whirl around and leave in such a huff, you know?"

"But we're friends," Xiao Jingrui bit his lip. "Shouldn't friends care about each other?"

Yan Yujin said, frowning, "You still don't get it? Let me tell you, when Brother Su said that to you, he wasn't trying to reject your concern for him, but rather because he really, truly, wanted to walk back by himself! As for why he wanted to walk through the streets alone, I don't know. I was originally going to follow him to see, but you, dummy, turned and left, so I had no choice but to chase you over here."

"You mean...." Xiao Jingrui said dazedly, "Brother Su wanted to walk by himself not only for some time to think, but for some other reason as well?"

Yan Yujin laughed and looked at his friend. "Jingrui, you don't still believe that the reason Brother Su came to Jinling with us was to rest and recuperate, do you?"

"I..." Xiao Jingrui faltered a moment. "Of course I'm not that

slow.... But he never seemed to be trying to hide anything from us on purpose, but rather just let everything happen naturally....”

“Brother Su entering the capital and getting sucked into this whole mess must not have been a coincidence. Everything he does has a purpose; it’s just that we don’t know what he’s trying to do.”

Xiao Jingrui’s thick eyebrows furrowed, his forehead wrinkled, and he let out a long sigh, “I think I know....”

“You know?” Yan Yujin’s eyes widened, and he abruptly dropped on top of Xiao Jingrui. “Let’s hear it!”

“I found out from Xie Bi that the ‘qilin prodigy’ he mentioned before actually came from the Master of Langya Hall. And the reason both the Crown Prince and Prince Yu are falling over each other to recruit him also came from there.” Xiao Jingrui shoved at the weight on top of him, couldn’t budge it, and gave up. “I think, with Brother Su’s abilities and the power of Jiangzuo Alliance, there’s no way he only found out about this after he came to the capital....”

“Ng,” Yan Yujin nodded. “Makes sense, continue.”

“Since Brother Su knew all along that the Crown Prince and Prince Yu were interested in him, then even if he didn’t come to the capital, trouble would still come knocking at his door. And then, not only would he have to get involved, the whole Jiangzuo Alliance probably would as well.”

“So in order not to bring trouble to Lang province, this great chief decided to come to the capital personally to handle everything?” Yan Yujin shook his head and laughed. “That still makes sense, and it’s an answer someone like you would think of.”

“Of course I’m not that naive!” Xiao Jingrui smacked the head lying somewhere above him a little resentfully. “But Brother Su has been very passive in all of this! The power of the Crown Prince and Prince Yu is not something that can be countered by a Jianghu

sect, not to mention Brother Su is an incredibly learned and resourceful strategist, well-deserving of the reputation of qilin prodigy. Even if he really came to the capital to choose a liege-lord, there's nothing wrong with that. What person in this world does not want to build a name for himself, to obtain glory and honour? Besides, you and I can both see how important his Jiangzuo Alliance is to him, and if he succeeds here, that would mean the Jiangzuo Alliance would receive the support of the court, so this must count as one of his goals as well...."

"Then what are you going to do?" Yan Yujin watched him closely. "He is a Jianghu man, but wants to dive into the fights of the court to make a name for himself. You are the son of a noble house, but want to stay far away from these palace politics. The two of you are running in opposite directions, so why do you care about him so much?"

"They're two different things! I care about him because he is a person worth befriending, what does that have to do with whether he enters the court in the future?"

"But the path he has chosen isn't one commonly picked by scholars." Yan Yujin's tone took on a certain coolness. "Jingrui, Brother Su is clearly planning to enter into the fight for the throne. Don't you feel uneasy at all?"

Xiao Jingrui thought for a long while, then sighed quietly. "Yes, I am worried, what if the side he chooses should come to fail...."

"That's not what I meant," Yan Yujin cut him off immediately. "I may not care which side he chooses, but you? Aren't you afraid the stance of the Xie household might be the opposite of the one he chooses?"

Xiao Jingrui had honestly never considered this aspect, and he was stunned for a long time, before finally saying, "That shouldn't be a problem. Although Xie Bi is a bit biased towards Prince Yu, my father is still very neutral...."

“Your father can’t remain neutral forever!” Yan Yujin asserted. “Your father is not like my father. Although my father has the status of a marquis, his position barely has any obligations. But your father is the head of the military officials, the pillar of the court. Recruiting ministers to their side has always been the most important concern of the members of the royal family; how could he so easily remain out of these matters?”

“But...but...” Xiao Jingrui considered carefully and thought of the worst outcome, suddenly feeling goosebumps rising over his arms and cold sweat breaking out over his body.

“Hey, hey,” Yan Yujin hurriedly slapped his pale cheeks. “It’s a fifty-fifty chance, that’s not too bad, you don’t need to scare yourself like this so early, do you?”

Xiao Jingrui pushed his friend aside, his face solemn. “That’s it, I’m going to go convince Brother Su, these palace waters are really too murky, he would do better not to enter them....”

“Psh, you said yourself he is the passive one in all of this. Even if he promised you not to get involved, have the Crown Prince and Prince Yu promised?” Yan Yujin brushed off the bits of grass in his hands, and sat up, crossing his legs. “Jingrui, to tell you the truth, the situation has long progressed beyond something that can be influenced by you or me. I was only reminding you, in the future, it’s hard to say whether he will be a friend or an enemy, so don’t become too attached to him now.”

Xiao Jingrui stood stiffly, shaken because he didn’t understand why Yujin had said such things, or perhaps because he had understood the deeper meaning behind his words. He stared dazedly at Yan Yujin for a long time, not saying a word.

“Ai,” the rarely-serious son of the Imperial Uncle showed a solemn expression now, his hands grasping Xiao Jingrui’s shoulders heavily as he said quietly, “You should understand, Brother Su is not like us. We simply cannot fathom how deep, how

hard his heart is, and what kinds of thoughts are held within. You are different – your heart is too warm, too soft, too practical. So listen to me, keep a bit of a distance and remain casual acquaintances, alright? He is no longer the Brother Su you brought into the capital, the one you promised to look after while he recovered his health. I can guarantee that his mind has not the slightest space left in it to consider you now, and if you continue to warmly treat him as your good friend like you did in the past, then, in the future, the person who will come to grief, the one who will be hurt, will be you, do you understand?”

“Yujin....”

“I am only telling you this as your friend. From now on, you must tell yourself, Su Zhe is just a stranger you met by chance, a friend without any deep connections to you, with whom you came to the capital, and who is now a guest in your home, and that’s it. You cannot keep one-sidedly treating him as an intimate soulmate. How much he cares for you, I don’t know; I only know that in his eyes, you cannot be the same kind of soulmate to him. To be blunt, Brother Su is a person of unfathomable depths, and even if we gained unlimited grandeur or renown, neither you nor I would have the right to become his confidant.”

Xiao Jingrui had almost never seen Yan Yujin speak to him with such seriousness, and couldn’t help being shaken. He lowered his head and thought for a long while, and found nothing wrong in his words. But could the subtle feelings and relationships between people really be so clearly analyzed and explained in a few sentences?

“Alright, I’m done speaking, take your time thinking then.” Yan Yujin jumped up and pulled Xiao Jingrui up by his arm, letting a carefree smile spread over his face again. “Come with me to Miaoyin House to listen to music! I haven’t been in so long, Miss Gongyu must be missing me, and I heard Mister Shisan has composed a new song. And then tonight, we can take a boat to look

at the lights along the river, what do you say?”

“What can I say?” Xiao Jingrui gave him a look. “The Young Master orders me to come, dare I refuse?”

“Haha, that’s more like it. I guess you’re not cold even though you’re still wet all over. Come on, you can change when we get to Miaoyin House....”

“Yujin...”

“Hm?”

“I think I’ll go home to change...”

“Please, your home is in the middle of the city, Miaoyin House is by the west gate, can’t you tell which is nearer?”

Xiao Jingrui’s gaze fell to the ground as he mumbled, “I want to go back first to see...Brother Su was walking alone...to see if he has arrived home....”

Yan Yujin crossed his arms, his expression exceedingly helpless.

“When I turned around to leave, did you see what his reaction was like?”

“There was no reaction.” Yan Yujin said, looking displeased. “He was really in deep thought at that time, and didn’t even notice you were angry, but just kept walking slowly further and further away.”

“You know his old illness flared up after he drank that cup of wine, and he was walking slowly because he wasn’t feeling well. Even just as a casual friend, as you said, one should still care about this. What if he fainted somewhere? The capital is not Lang province, and Fei Liu didn’t go with him, and he is not familiar with the people or the surroundings here...”

“Fine, fine,” Yan Yujin raised his arms in defeat. “You make it sound like I’m really heartless. So according to you, we’ll look for him, and if we find him unconscious somewhere, we’ll first take

him home and then go listen to music, is that what you mean?”

“No matter what I say, why do the words always come out so awkward when you repeat them?”

“Is it my words that are awkward or you?” Yan Yujin made a dismissive noise. “What kind of person is this chief of Jiangzuo Alliance? Since his true purpose in coming to Jinling wasn’t to recover his health, then he certainly could not have only brought a Fei Liu with him. I don’t know anything else, but I bet even just the four jianghu experts who escorted us into the capital haven’t left.”

“I just want to have a look, just in case....”

“I already said we’ll do it your way, what are you being so long-winded for?” Yan Yujin turned and pulled their horses over, then tossed Xiao Jingrui his reins, and , holding onto his own saddle, put his left leg into the stirrup and was just pushing off with his right when he suddenly let out an “Aiya!”

“What is it?” Xiao Jingrui turned his head.

“I slipped on this rock.” Yan Yujin pushed the rock aside with his foot, and then sent it flying with a kick.

The rock landed in a depressed area in the field, and as the grass was thick, it didn’t make much noise as it landed. Instead, the rustling sounds of the grass nearby were heard clearly.

“Who’s there eavesdropping?” Yan Yujin’s brow furrowed as he shouted in a clear voice.

“I arrived before you, so who’s eavesdropping on whom?” A serene voice drifted over. “I already did my best not to disturb you, but when a rock falls out of the sky, you can’t blame me for dodging, can you?”

Following these clear words, a person stood up slowly before the eyes of the two noble sons. He wore simple, pale-coloured robes, his figure tall and thin, his hair half tied back, his eyes hidden with

an unreadable expression. Although his face was clearly young, there was a streak of white near his forehead amidst the sea of black, giving him a soft, gentle air.

Chapter 33: Xuanjing Officer

After seeing the person who had appeared before them clearly, Yan Yujin and Xiao Jingrui exchanged a glance, then stepped backwards at the same time and huddled together, discussing in low voices. “Which one is it?”

“I think it’s gege...”

“But just in case...what if it’s jiejie?”

“Jiejie has only just left, how could she return so quickly? Wouldn’t she have to investigate for a while...”

“You have a point, it was so far away...”

The person who had appeared watched them from afar, smiling, and said lightly, “Xiao Jin, I’ve let you two talk while staying this far away, without the slightest sign of pouncing on you, doesn’t that already tell you who I am?”

Yan Yujin’s eyes widened, he debated a moment longer, then finally made up his mind, and a huge smile spread over his face as he bounded over joyfully and threw his arms around the person’s neck, exclaiming, “Xia Qiu gege, you’re back! Was Donghai any fun?”

A wicked grin spread across the person’s face as she slowly raised her arms and trapped Yan Yujin within her embrace.

Xiao Jingrui felt a trembling cold spread from his head to his toes, as the hairs on his back stood up, and he involuntarily backed up a few steps, shouting loudly, “Yujin, run! It’s Xia Dong jiejie!”

But his warning came too late. Yan Yujin’s whole body stiffened and he was about to struggle when his two arms were neatly pinned and twisted behind his back by one of Xia Dong’s hands, and as he gazed helplessly, she lifted her other hand with infinite slowness and rested it on his cheek, caressing gently.

“Jingrui...” Yan Yujin said in a trembling voice. “Don’t you have any ties of brotherhood, hurry and come rescue me...”

“Rescue you?” Xia Dong’s gaze swept away and she asked in a gentle voice, “Xiao Rui, are you going to come rescue him?”

Xiao Jingrui’s head shook like a rattle-drum.

“Xiao Jin, you asked me if Donghai was any fun? Too bad I wouldn’t know, because I’ve never been there.” Xia Dong’s fingers suddenly tightened as she pinched Yan Yujin’s cheek, leaving behind a red mark. Xiao Jingrui, watching, felt his own face twinge in pain. “Do you know where I went? I went to Bin Province, such a poor and desolate place, and for such a bothersome investigation, which required so much effort on my part.... Who brought me such a troublesome task, let me see....”

“Heeeeelp...” Yan Yujin felt his cheek flare in pain, and wailed without the slightest bit of exaggeration, “I didn’t do it on purpose...who knew His Majesty would send you....”

“What’s the use in crying for help?” Xia Dong laughed. “Xia Qiu went to Donghai, Xia Chun went to bring his daughter-in-law to Qingjiang province, I’d like to see who’s going to come to your rescue. You disobedient boy, you bring back problems for me even when you go out to play? Do you think your Xia Dong jiejie is too idle? If I really had nothing else to do, I could still train the two of you, or have you forgotten the pain of the past now that you’re all grown up?”

Hearing the word ‘train’, the two noble sons suddenly felt weak in the knees.

There is a school of thought regarding the training of dogs that says, no matter how fierce or vicious the breed, the reason a dog never dares to fight its master is because, ever since it was very young, it is struck with a wooden stick each time it fights back, and because it was so small, it could never win. As the days went by, a knowledge took root in its mind: fighting against this person is

useless, because it can never win. Even after it has grown much bigger and far stronger, and grown out viciously sharp teeth, every time it sees the person who trained it, it will immediately revert to being docile and submissive.

Back in the day, Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin had been two of those young dogs, and Xia Dong, naturally, had been their trainer.

In the history of Da Liang, there had long been an investigations institution that answered directly to the Emperor – the Xuanjing Bureau. Its members were known as Xuanjing Officers, and its craft was passed down from master to apprentice, emphasizing an extremely high degree of loyalty to the monarch, and operating directly by imperial decree to investigate the most important, most secretive cases. The current head of the Xuanjing Bureau, Xia Jiang, had trained three apprentices: Xia Qiu and Xia Dong, who were twin siblings, and [Xia Chun](#), who was not related to them by blood. The three had completely different temperaments, but like the previous members of their bureau, had become very close. Originally, the responsibilities of the Xuanjing Bureau did not include ‘dog training’, but seventeen years ago, the Emperor had suddenly felt that the noble sons were pampered and spoiled, and not fit to bring prosperity to his kingdom, and so he had opened a corner of the palace called the Shuren Courtyard and ordered all male children aged five to eleven of third-rank officials or higher to be sent there for physical training by the Xuanjing officers. Xia Chun and Xia Qiu were relatively gentler, and although strict in their training, would at least consider the tolerance level of the young darlings. But the twenty-year-old Xia Dong, then newly made officer and brimming with eagerness to serve the royal family, took the training she had received from her own master and implemented it directly into the training of these tender young puppies, and every day, loud wailing and miserable shrieks were heard from Shuren Courtyard. The poor Yan Yujin had just turned five, a little pearl of a boy in his powdered make up, and though he was originally a proud, flamboyant little sapling, after a few days

of training, he had been transformed into a shaking little leaf that spontaneously curled up as if struck by frost whenever he so much as caught a glimpse of Xia Dong jiejie.

Xia Jiang = ‘summer river’; Xia Dong = ‘summer winter’; Xia Qiu = ‘summer autumn’; Xia Chun = ‘summer spring’.....and now please go read the amazing Legend of Xia Xia

“Xia...Xia Dong jiejie...” Because the period of Xiao Jingrui’s suffering had been relatively short, the scars of the past were lighter on him than on Yan Yujin, and he screwed up his courage and said, “Yujin really didn’t do it on purpose, we met the accusers on the road, and we couldn’t just stand by and do nothing....”

Xia Dong made a dismissive sound, the hand wrapped around Yan Yujin’s wrist not lessening in strength, but instead pulling him even closer. In fact, based on outward appearance alone, although Xia Dong was not born with particularly feminine features, she was nonetheless very beautiful, and, because of the rigorous training of her inner strength, appeared significantly younger than her true age. But to Yan Yujin, whose mind was filled only with painful memories, this beautiful face seemed like the mask of the devil, and, as it inched closer and closer to him, this son of the Imperial Uncle only felt his scalp growing numb, and almost let out a sharp yelp.

“Xiao Jin, don’t say anything, help me walk slowly to the road....” The soft words drifted into his ear, and suddenly the body leaning on his grew heavy, and the metallic smell of blood floated into his nose. Yan Yujin’s heart sank, but he quickly straightened his expression, inconspicuously shifting his stance to support Xia Dong, who was beginning to sway unsteadily, and continued to speak in a pleading tone, “Xia Dong jiejie, don’t be angry, once jiejie has returned to the capital and completed her task, you can punish me however you like.” As he spoke, he grasped Xia Dong’s elbow with one hand and turned, throwing Xiao Jingrui a meaningful look.

Xiao Jingrui stared back, and because he'd had some training in the jianghu world, immediately realized something was wrong, and though he kept his original position and expression, he quickly swept a gaze left and right, and then stilled his breath to sense his surroundings, and indeed felt a wave of murderous energy wafting over.

"You little rascal, you've always had a sweet tongue," Xia Dong smiled, suddenly revealing a girlish charm, and continued, "You think you can summon the troops to your rescue? Don't think you can escape from my grasp. Walk with me!"

"Alright, alright, alright, when have I ever dared to disobey Xia Dong jiejie?" Yan Yujin laughed, then asked in a low voice, "Are you alright? Can you ride?"

Xia Dong smilingly smacked him over the head, and murmured out of the corner of her mouth, "Keep walking like this. As long as I don't fall over, they won't dare come out into the open."

By this time, Xiao Jingrui had also drawn close with the horses, his expression full of concern, but not daring to speak aloud.

"Don't worry, at this distance, they won't hear us if we're quiet." Xia Dong continued to speak in a low tone. "They don't want me to enter the city, so maybe they'll bet everything on one attack....You two be prepared too. There are people in the river, and in the forest on the far shore...."

The two readied their energies; one, still pretending to have his arm trapped, walked in front, supporting Xia Dong, and the other walked behind them with the horses, purposefully falling behind to guard their backs. As the three moved slowly towards the direction of the road, from a distance, it looked as if they were laughing and teasing, without the slightest hint of nervousness.

But Xia Dong's breathing became more and more erratic, her steps heavier and heavier, betraying the deteriorating situation, and Xiao Jingrui, seeing the bloody footprints left by the two in

front, knew in his heart that the situation was not good, and could only purposefully lead the horses over the bloody tracks in the hopes that they would not be noticed by the assassins behind them.

But the tracking abilities of trained assassins are naturally unusually high, and despite the fact that the three had not made any mistakes, a whistle suddenly sounded from the forest across the brook, and with a rustling of leaves, a number of grey silhouettes flew out from the trees. At the same time, the calm surface of the lake suddenly erupted, and about ten assassins dressed in silver water-armor flew from its depths, splitting waves before them with their hands. The two groups met and fanned out, then charged straight for the three travellers.

Without any words or speech, the vicious battle had begun. The assassins' attacks were not elegant or pretty, but effective enough in their simplicity; charge, thrust, hack, chop – each action was neat, and only designed for the purpose of ending a life. Even though Xiao Jingrui had some experience in face-to-face battles from his travels in the jianghu world, he was overwhelmed by the sudden onset of murderous energy, and his actions became sluggish, and as for Yan Yujin, who had only ever experienced fights in competitions, his reaction was even worse. In addition, the two did not have weapons at hand, and faced with the ferocious attacks of numerous assassins empty-handed, the situation was deteriorating quickly. If their opponents had not been so clearly targeting Xia Dong, they might have quickly met their ends.

In comparison, Xia Dong had much more experience as a Xuanjing officer, and she did not give an inch, a shining dagger appearing suddenly in her hands as she met the assassins stroke for stroke, matching their simplicity and speed, making it difficult for her attackers to draw near. But unfortunately, she had already been wounded, and as time went on, her strength began to falter, and after fending off a few fierce strokes, her legs grew weak, and

she swayed before falling to the ground, and though she was still fighting fiercely, her life was clearly in jeopardy.

Fortunately, after the initial attack, Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin had steadied considerably. They knew that any assassin that dared to attack a Xuanjing Officer would be unlikely to consider their own noble ranks, and anyway they might not even be aware of their identities, and so as one, they had increased their concentration, and their attacks were becoming much smoother. One was a disciple of [Tianquan Manor](#), and the other was trained in the [Qianmen Method](#), and their martial arts were certainly ranked top amongst the younger generation. In addition, they were faced with a fight to the death, and aside from considering themselves, they naturally also wanted to save their friends, and so they fought with all their strength, holding nothing back. After they had gotten a firm foothold, the two stood guard in front of Xia Dong, shoulder to shoulder, fighting in synchrony, and although they couldn't avoid receiving a few cuts and blows, they managed to slowly turn the situation around, finally even managing to obtain two daggers.

Tianquan Manor (translates to “Heaven Spring Manor”) is one of the Jianghu sects, with its own style of martial artistry. Xiao Jingrui learned this style of martial arts under his father from the Zhuo side, Zhuo Dingfeng, who is the current chief of Tianquan Manor, and who is ranked fourth on the Langya List of Martial Arts Experts.

translates to ‘The Way of Heaven’s Gate’

Tianquan Manor was famed in the jianghu world for its swordsmanship, the height of its abilities in this aspect almost reaching the heavens. Xiao Jingrui was wielding his dagger like a sword, and although it wasn't very natural, his fighting power had already increased drastically. Add to that Yan Yujin's dazzling movements and Xia Dong's strange moves, and the situation had changed in the blink of an eye, with the two sides suddenly evenly

matched.

The assassins were used to carrying out their shady missions in one quick stroke, and to have fallen into this lengthy fight was no laughing matter, not to mention that this was already the outskirts of the city, and the longer the fight went on, the greater the risk of being come across by other travellers. And so, a whistle sounded in the thick forest again, urgent and short, and the three felt the focus of the fight shift, now turning to the masters Xiao and Yan. Xia Dong seized the chance to rest briefly and backed up a few steps away from the fight, catching her breath and trying to stop the bleeding from her wounds.

Although the pressure had increased and they had lost Xia Dong's support, Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin's synchronous attacks had reached a new level, and their confidence was rising. Their daggers flashed steadily, and already a few of the assassins had retreated away staggering, but their enemies were numerous, and more immediately rushed up to take their places.

At this point, the whistle sounded again, this time with a low ending note, and five silver-robed assassins rose up in a formation designed for a suicidal attack. At the same time, the leader of the attack showed himself, feet striking against the water as he flew across the surface of the river, swiftly arriving at the scene of the fight, and led all of the remaining assassins, including those wounded on the ground, into formation surrounding the masters Xiao and Yan, and then diving around them straight for Xia Dong.

"Jiejie, look out!" Yan Yujin screamed, backing up at lightning speed with Xiao Jingrui, fighting to reach Xia Dong's side before the enemy. After suffering such a close attack, how could they give up so easily? Their eyes widened as the grey figures flew past them, trailing icy wind, and flying cruelly straight for Xia Dong.

"Xia Dong jiejie..." Hearing the two's desperate cries, Xia Dong, who had long-since been exhausted and weakened, suddenly lifted her head, a cold light flashing in her eyes, and turned her body in a

spin, whirling like a tornado, disappearing into a blur of colour, and the first few figures to reach her were sent flying.

This sudden massive change not only left the two noble sons shocked, even the assassins looked a bit dazed. But as long as everything had not yet ended, Xia Dong's fierce attack did not slow for a moment, but cut through the assassins like a knife, striking them aside with one blow, and, amidst the lightning-fast strikes of her attacks, she suddenly grabbed one of the assassins by the chest and triumphantly twisted his mouth, dislocating his jaw, then smoothly flipped him onto the ground and held him there with one foot.

The assassins were growing flustered, and seeing that their mission would be impossible to complete, backed up quickly and fled across the brook to the safety of the forest. The masters Xiao and Yan weren't inclined to pursue, and only chased them to the edge of the river before stopping and turning around to stare at Xia Dong.

The beautiful lady officer of the Xuanjing Bureau turned her face to the sky and laughed loudly, then poked her captive with one foot, shook out the long hair over her shoulders, cast a fluid glance around with a flamboyant expression, and then said in a loud, clear voice, "Thank you both for showing up to help, or I wouldn't have been able to capture this coward of a leader alive.... His martial arts aren't much, but his dodging skills are really not bad, he wouldn't come near me on the road at all, and made himself pretty hard to catch.... Hahaha...."

Chapter 34: Assassin

There are some people in this world who, no matter what they do, can't really be argued with.

To Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin, Xia Dong was one such person.

So, although both had unhappy expressions on their faces, neither dared to actually voice a single word of protest.

“Come on, let's see where you've hidden the poison for your suicide.”

Xia Dong bent down, pulled the leader of the assassins up, and forcefully grabbed his dislocated jaw, causing both of his legs to jump in pain, his face growing pale as wax.

She clicked her tongue.

“So it's really still hidden in the teeth, huh?

What a lack of creativity, can't you find a new place?”

Although she spoke casually, the masters Xiao and Yan, who were listening nearby, couldn't help shuddering and exchanging a glance.

An assassin who would commit suicide if he failed was among those ranked highest in his field, and were not only difficult to find, but also exceedingly expensive.

What kind of result had Xia Dong's investigations in Bin province achieved, to have provoked a reaction of this degree?

“There's no point asking you questions like this, we'll have to take out the poison pouch first.”

Xia Dong ignored the paling faces of the two nearby and considered how to extract the poison pouch from the teeth of the assassin so she could relocate his jaw for the interrogation.

Women were usually inclined towards cleanliness, and though

oft-mistaken for a handsome gentleman, Xia Dong was no exception.

She gripped his jaw and examined it for a long time, but couldn't think of any way to extract the poison pouch without putting her fingers inside, and, finally growing impatient, delivered a hard punch with her fist against his cheek.

With a smothered groan, the assassin spewed forth a spray of fresh blood along with a few teeth and a tiny pouch.

Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin exchanged another glance, their faces turning green.

She was still a devil behind that pretty face then, every bit as vicious and merciless as she had been in those years....

Xia Dong nonchalantly wiped the back of her hand on her robes, then relocated the assassin's jaw with a loud crack.

She didn't hurriedly start asking questions, but instead took his wrist and twisted hard, immediately breaking the bone, and making him scream out in pain until he could only take loud gasping breaths, like a dying fish, his body spasming uncontrollably, as he turned a poisonous glare on her.

“Still dare look at me like that?”

Xia Dong let out a cold laugh, then grabbed his other wrist, squeezing up along his arm as the sounds of breaking bones filled the air, until his arm was limp as clay.

The assassin, yelling in pain, fainted, and then was quickly awakened again by the intense pain.

“Xia Dong jiejie!”

Although he knew this was an assassin who would not have so much as blinked before murdering them, Xiao Jingrui still couldn't stand it.

“Wait, stop, this is too....

And anyway, don't you need to ask him questions?

If you torture him to death, that won't do you any good....”

“You're right, I'd almost forgotten.”

Xia Dong pulled the assassin's head up by the scalp and stared him straight in the eye, her voice dripping with ice, “I prefer beating prisoners up to asking questions.

So don't answer me too happily, and deprive me of the chance to use a few of my punishments....”

“Xia Dong jiejie....”

Xiao Jingrui was about to continue when he was pulled to one side by Yan Yujin, who urged, “Don't get involved, Xuanjing officers have their own way of doing things, we won't be able to intervene.”

“Is this kind of questioning under torture really effective?”

“He's a suicidal assassin, he might not say anything if she isn't ruthless enough.

If you're not used to it, then don't look.

Not everything on this earth can be done with warmth and kindness, with politeness and modesty.”

Yan Yujin glanced back, then sighed.

“It looks like the case with the Duke of Qing isn't so simple.

I wonder how much trouble it's going to cause.”

“I find it strange,” Xiao Jingrui said, frowning.

“Everyone knows it's a bad idea to get on the wrong side of the Xuanjing Bureau.

Why bother putting so much effort into attacking Xia Dong jie when they could have stopped the accusers from entering the capital?

If they had sent assassins of this capacity to kill Grandfather and Grandmother Hu, they wouldn't have been able to escape into East River territory....

Now the case has already been raised, and Xuanjing officers have already received the secret imperial order to start investigating, isn't it much more difficult to try to silence them now?"

"Perhaps the Duke of Qing didn't know about it in the beginning."

Yan Yujin thought it over.

"Maybe the people over in Bin province figured they could handle it themselves, and didn't send word over, not expecting us to meet the accusers and help them arrive safely into the capital.

And only then did those implicated in the case start to get scared...."

Xiao Jingrui shook his head.

"If the Duke of Qing didn't know all the details in the beginning, then at worst, it would only have been a crime of conniving with his relatives, so why would it have come to sending assassins after a Xuanjing officer?"

"Maybe Xia Dong jie found out something else in her investigations in Bin province, maybe these assassins have nothing to do with the Duke of Qing, maybe she made some enemies with that temper of hers," Yan Yujin raised an eyebrow.

"The possibilities are endless.

I don't like mulling over things like this, it's too bothersome.

Let Xia Dong jie do the worrying for herself.

Once she's investigated thoroughly, we can ask her directly, and avoid standing here letting our imaginations run wild."

"Oh!"

Xiao Jingrui suddenly cried out in fear, and Yan Yujin jumped in fright, following his gaze to see Xia Dong dropping the limp body of the assassin onto the ground as if she were throwing down a dead dog, then draw out a silk handkerchief and wipe her hands, her crescent eyebrows furrowed.

“What is it?”

Yan Yujin asked.

Xiao Jingrui looked solemn, and slowly ground out two words: “He’s dead.”

“Xiao Rui’s eyesight is pretty good,” Xia Dong threw them a glance.

“He is dead indeed.

It’s really too bad, wasting all my efforts to capture him.

I didn’t know there was more poison hidden under the corner of his lip.

He stretched out his tongue, touched it, and died.

The strange and nauseating part is, he wasn’t afraid he would touch it accidentally when he wasn’t ready to die....”

“Then did you find out anything?”

Yan Yujin stepped closer, glanced at the swollen, green face of the corpse, and hurriedly looked away.

“He was the leader, so he must know something.”

“He only said four words,” Xia Dong spoke impassively.

“‘It is not over’.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means this hasn’t ended.”

Xia Dong’s leg flew up as she kicked the corpse and swore, “Damn it, as if I needed for him to tell me that!

They've provoked me this far, I wouldn't let it be over even if they wanted it to be over!"

"Xia Dong jiejie...."

Yan Yujin wiped at the cold sweat on his forehead.

"You're a lady, you shouldn't swear, it's so inelegant...."

"Oh?"

Xia Dong's voice was sweet as she turned a tender smile towards him, charm lacing the corners of her eyes and mouth.

"The young master Yan has grown up and knows what a lady is.

Come here and tell jiejie, how should a lady speak to you?"

Yan Yujin stumbled backwards and hid behind Xiao Jingrui, deeply regretting his quick tongue.

"Nothing, nothing, our Xia Dong jiejie is beautiful and clever, the most extraordinary lady in Da Liang."

Xia Dong laughed and said, "How could I be the most extraordinary?"

But I hear the most extraordinary lady is finally taking a husband?

How did that go, has she found one yet?"

Yan Yujin was astonished, and turning to look at Xiao Jingrui, saw that he was equally stunned.

Actually, since leaving Shuren Courtyard, the two had not often had the chance to meet Xia Dong, and so didn't know how she felt towards Princess Nihuang.

But no matter what, Nihuang was a princess, known for her noble behaviour and unsullied morals, and Xia Dong, as a Xuanjing officer, served under the court, so it wasn't proper for her to speak so teasingly of the Princess.

"What, Xia Dong jie doesn't like Princess Nihuang?"

Xiao Jingrui couldn't help asking.

“Do I have the right to like or dislike?”

Xia Dong's tone had suddenly grown hard, and somehow, there was a sense of grief in her voice.

“She is a remarkable woman, and should have married long ago.

I told her ten years ago when I was helping out in her camp, that as soon as she married someone, I would consider her a good friend.”

The more they heard, the more confused they were, and they couldn't understand what kind of attitude Xia Dong bore towards Princess Nihuang.

After being stunned for a long time, Yan Yujin asked quietly, “Xia Dong jie's meaning is that, as long as the Princess doesn't marry, you won't see her as a good friend?”

“That's right.”

“But why?”

Unless the friendship between women depend on whether or not they are married?”

Xia Dong's gaze was like ice as she looked at them coldly, saying, “You are too young.

There are many things you do not know about.

Since it's nothing to do with you, don't ask any further.”

“We're too young?”

Yan Yujin cried out.

“How much older is the Princess compared to us?”

“Everything can change in the blink of an eye, and sometimes, a year can become a lifetime.”

Xia Dong looked forward steadily, her face a little pale, a few

strands of hair drifting around her neck, and though her expression had not changed, her whole person suddenly seemed weaker.

“She herself is actually not too clear about the events of that year, but she was involved in the events, and so cannot remain free from them.

But you two are different...you are complete outsiders.

The events of the past are like a mountain buried deep in thick snow, and those who had nothing to do with it would find it very difficult to enter.

Why must you keep trying to find out more just to satisfy your curiosity?”

The masters Xiao and Yan looked at each other, still not comprehending, but as they had already been told to stop asking, they didn't continue pressing the matter.

Besides, the person before them was the lady devil of the Shuren Courtyard, so they wouldn't have dared to keep pushing anyway.

“You still haven't answered me, what kind of husband has the Princess chosen?”

Xia Dong shook her head and the glaring white patch of hair on her forehead disappeared under thick black strands, as if she had shaken aside the memories that had risen up a moment ago.

“Such a large competition, there must have been some good candidates chosen, right?”

“Nothing has been decided yet, the written test is tomorrow.”

Yan Yujin sighed.

“But there's still the one-on-one martial arts competition with Princess Nihuang, and if you lose that, then there's no hope.

I think none of those chosen can compete against her, and she doesn't seem to be especially interested in any one of them, so I

guess she isn't planning to marry this time."

The corner of Xia Dong's mouth lifted in a smile.

"You look a bit disappointed."

"Of course I am."

Yan Yujin frowned.

"What's wrong with me, that she didn't even give me a moment of serious consideration?"

"There's nothing wrong with you," Xia Dong didn't tease him for once.

"But to Nihuang, you are a bit young.

She is the sole commander of her army, so she would probably only consider those more mature than herself."

Yan Yujin let out an exaggerated sigh, and said mournfully, "I wasn't born yet when the Princess was born, and when I was born, the Princess has already grown old...."

"Hey," Xiao Jingrui didn't know whether to laugh or cry as he kicked him.

"Stop talking nonsense.

Who are you calling old?"

"Ah ah ah," Yan Yujin hurriedly covered his mouth.

"I misspoke, I misspoke, I should be beaten.

But you understand what I mean, I'm only mourning the fact that I wasn't born a few years earlier....

If I was Brother Su's age, then the Princess wouldn't keep treating me like her little brother...."

"Don't drag Brother Su into this," Xiao Jingrui glared at him.

"How can the difference in Brother Su's maturity and steadiness compared to yours be measured in years alone?"

“Yes, yes, no one can compare to Brother Su in your eyes.

But what he thinks about the Princess, and whether the Princess has any feelings towards him besides admiration, I can’t tell....”

Yan Yujin was going to take the chance to exclaim over what had happened in Wuying Hall today, but suddenly remembering that Xia Dong was an officer of the Xuanjing Bureau, and that the matter involved different parties in the palace, and that Mei Changsu had refused to explain more about the matter, only saying that news would certainly be carried out tomorrow for everyone to hear, he thought there was some mysterious element involved, and that it would be better not to say anything at all.

“Don’t indulge in foolish thoughts.”

In the end, Xiao Jingrui was still treating Mei Changsu with the love and respect of a younger brother to an older, and he refused to let anyone talk about him behind his back; plus, he was worried that, in his merry chatter, Yan Yujin might let slip the events that had taken place after the Emperor had left and thus bring needless trouble to Mei Changsu, and so he immediately interrupted him and said, “Xia Dong jie has just returned, why don’t you talk about something serious and tell her about the ten finalists?”

“I’m not interested in these finalists,” Xia Dong said indifferently.

“But this Brother Su is rather interesting.

I heard you two discussing him over and over when I was lying in the grass just now; he seems quite a character.

What, so is he one of those with an ounce of talent who came into the capital brimming with ambition, ready to chase after fame and glory?”

“Brother Su isn’t like that!”

Xiao Jingrui was extremely unhappy.

“Xia Dong jie doesn’t know him, how can you judge him?”

“It looks like you respect him deeply.”

Xia Dong’s expression grew cool.

“Don’t know him, huh?”

Then I will go and get to know him.

The Crown Prince and Prince Yu are fighting over him, his worth must be placed even higher than Princess Nihuang’s.

With someone like him in the capital, how could a Xuanjing Officer such as I not go and get to know him?”

Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin exchanged a few nervous glances, communicated quickly with their eyes, and finally it was the son of the Imperial Uncle who stepped forward and said seriously, “What Xia Dong jie has mentioned, we also need to explain.

What you heard just now was largely our own speculation, and some of it was unhappy venting due to disputes between friends.

Brother Su is our friend, and has not had any errant behaviour since he entered the capital.

We ask Xia Dong jie to please not hold any bias towards him as a result of our careless words....”

“Don’t worry,”

Xia Dong looked at the serious expressions of the two young people before her, and couldn’t help smiling.

“Naturally I will first investigate the matter.

We will not bring only winds and shadows of suspicion before the Emperor, or do you take us Xuanjing Officers for gossips?”

Of course, this answer was not satisfying, but if they kept protesting, it might only increase Xia Dong’s interest towards Mei Changsu, and in any case, she had heard both what she should have and what she should not have, and they had only themselves

to blame for not being more alert, and couldn't blame the listener for drawing her own conclusions.

"Looks like we won't be having any more unexpected visitors today."

Xia Dong had seen the two's expression, but acted as if she had not noticed, casually straightening her robes and saying, "Let's enter the city together."

Give me Xiao Yan's horse, you two can ride Xiao Rui's horse."

"Ah,"

Yan Yujin grumbled, "The two of us men on one horse...."

"You can come over and ride with me," Xia Dong laughed lightly.

"Who's coming?"

The two paled and shook their heads furiously.

"Then I'm afraid I'll have to trouble you."

Xiao Rui, hurry up and bring the horse over."

Xiao Jingrui obediently led the horse, who was grazing with its head bent, over and handed her the reins, saying quietly, "Xia Dong jie, should we take care of your wound first?"

It looks like there's some blood seeping out."

"In the end, you're the considerate, attentive one."

Xia Dong smiled slightly.

"No matter, we can take care of it after we enter the city."

"Xia Dong jie really got hurt?"

Yan Yujin concernedly stuck his head over.

"Where?"

Xia Dong stretched out a hand and flicked his forehead.

"Little brat, you only realized now?"

Those assassins weren't amateurs, if I didn't show them some real blood, how could we have so easily gotten that cowardly assassin to show his face?"

Xiao Jingrui glanced over at the corpse and said frowning, "We're not going to do anything about him?"

"A dead person who can no longer speak is like a broken knife that has been thrown away by its master.

What is the use in picking it up?"

Xia Dong's voice was cold.

"After we get back, we'll let the capital guards send someone to bury him.

He'd bother people if he's just left here."

"I guess that's the only way.

The body of an assassin must be clean, so they probably won't be able to trace anything.

Let's go."

Yan Yujin vaulted onto the horse, holding onto the saddle, and when Xiao Jingrui had jumped up behind him, he cheerfully pulled on the reins, ignoring everything else.

"Hey, do you have no bones, leaning against me so comfortably?"

Xiao Jingrui scolded him, smiling, not really minding much.

The sun was setting to the west, and amidst the soft hoof-beats and long shadows, the three rode steadily towards the city gates of the capital.

Chapter 35: Xia Dong

As Mei Changsu had predicted, in the work of a day, the news of Noble Consort Yue's dismissal and the Crown Prince's confinement had spread like wildfire through the palace.

Because the announcement had been made with overly vague language, only giving the reason for the punishment as "defied the Emperor, gave disrespectful service", all kinds of strange and creative guesses sprang up over the true reason for the edict, lending proof once again to the fathomless depths of the human imagination.

Some said that the Emperor had a new favourite amongst his imperial concubines, and she had murdered the noble consort; some said the noble consort had offended His Majesty with her constant meddling in the Crown Prince's palace responsibilities; some said the noble consort had been caught performing witchcraft in the Inner Palace by the Empress; some even said that the noble consort had recently adopted a young dog, who had yet to be trained, and had bitten the Emperor's honoured foot....

It was those who had the least idea of what had really happened who speculated the most wildly, whereas those insiders who had some idea of the truth kept quiet in fear, not a single one daring to say a word.

Because Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin had witnessed Mei Changsu's arrangements in Wuying hall that day, they could guess that the matter involved Princess Nihuang, but were not clear about the exact details, and because they were both intelligent and tactful, neither tried to find out more.

That day's written test was not postponed or cancelled because of these events, but to both the contestants and the host, this great husband-choosing competition had become somewhat of a farce.

Princess Nihuang's true thoughts and intentions were impossible

to unravel.

If one were to say that she had had no intention from the beginning to choose a husband in this way, then she would not have consented to have such a competition be hosted in her name.

But if one were to say that her heart had truly been moved and she was hoping to find a husband from amongst this multitude of young heroes, then her cool attitude didn't betray any such intention.

She had not showed any particular interest during either the earlier martial arts contests or after the ten finalists had been chosen, nor had she made any effort to get to know these finalists' characters, and their strengths and weaknesses, or even seemed to care much when others came to talk to her about them.

Rather, it was others of the Yunnan Mu household who had eagerly tracked down every last detail about the finalists, and found out both what they should have and what they should not have.

But to the contestants who had fought until this stage, they of course would not give up so easily, as maybe the Princess was only acting aloof, unwilling to outwardly show her preference, and until the last face-to-face fight, there was no way to know her true thoughts.

So, although the number of spectators who had arrived to watch the written test were far fewer than before, most of the contestants themselves, aside from those like Xiao Jingrui whose aim was only to fill the numbers, approached the test very seriously.

Among the crowds, those who had arrived with the greatest hopes and would be leaving with the greatest disappointment were the Northern Yan delegation.

They had come with the incredibly skilled martial artist Baili Qi, their pride and joy, who, out of all the finalists, had been the one

with the greatest chance of beating the Princess.

But who could have guessed that a sickly Mei Changsu would appear out of nowhere and completely defeat the outstanding fighter with who knew what kind of sorcery.

Even the losing would not have been a problem, and would only really be losing a bit of face, but for the fact that Baili Qi, for some unfathomable reason, had completely disappeared the second day after his defeat.

The Northern Yan officials had searched the whole capital, but had been unable to find half a shadow of the warrior, and had become the laughingstock of Da Liang.

They had not only failed to wed the Princess, they had even lost their own candidate, and one could only guess at the humiliation and suffering they would have to endure once they returned to their own country.

Of course, there must be some people who benefit from a competition like this.

Some had never intended to really reach the peak to pluck the flower, but had merely used the contest as a platform to show their skills, and as a chance to be make themselves known.

And the one who had expended the least effort but reaped the greatest reward was in fact this Su Zhe who had appeared out of nowhere.

Firstly, this mysterious, frail young man had a young bodyguard of incredible fighting skill, and so had gotten to know Commander Meng; then he had trained three children to defeat the first-place warrior of the martial arts contest by some strange methods, showing his own tremendous capabilities; and finally, he had overseen the Princess' written test with refined wisdom, earning His Majesty's praise for his radiant talent.

Some said he had even been invited as a commoner by imperial

order for a private meeting in the royal study, which had lasted almost four hours, and although no one knew what had been discussed, the rich gifts and the honoured title of ‘Guest Minister’ which had been bestowed afterwards showed without a doubt that this newcomer was not someone to be taken lightly, and some even claimed that this Su Zhe had certainly been the secretly determined match for the Princess all along, and that everyone else was really just there for show.

Such gossip naturally raised waves in its wake.

Although most of the contestants had not entered for the sake of the true prize, being used as cannon fodder is no laughing matter, and suddenly, the focus of the whole capital had fallen onto the shoulders of this young talent, and if he had not been residing in the heavily guarded residence of the Marquis of Ning, he might have already been skinned for a closer look.

But be that as it may, a steady stream of noble sons with no inconsiderable rank arrived daily at the door of the residence, asking for a closer look at this Su Zhe.

“Has the last person been defeated by the princess today?”

Mei Changsu pulled the fur cloak around his shoulders closer, and let out a long sigh.

“Such an exciting competition finally ended with no result, it’s really a shame.”

Xiao Jingrui stood before him, brows furrowed.

The longer he came to know this person, the more he felt as if he didn’t really understand him.

You couldn’t say he was a bad friend, because he was warm and considerate and understood his friends well, but if you said he said he was a good friend, you also could not deny that there seemed to be a glass wall before him that none of his friendships could truly penetrate.

When Xiao Jingrui saw him again, he was a little ashamed and embarrassed over his own little tantrum the other day, but he discovered that, just as Yan Yujin had said, Mei Changsu had seemingly not even noticed, without any trace of seeming upset by the previous events.

This kind of lukewarm attitude appeared in other situations as well, like in his behaviour towards the Princess.

He had clearly taken the matter to heart, and had taken the initiative to give whatever help he could, to the extent that he had become the talk of the capital over the matter, but on closer examination, he truly did not seem to have any other motives, and his hope that the Princess would be able to find a husband from the competition seemed to be sincere, without the slightest hint of hypocrisy.

At this moment, a strange sound was heard from the other side of the footpath, as if someone had been thrown out roughly.

Xiao Jingrui glanced over, shook his head, and sighed.

The two were currently not in Snow Cottage, but in a small pavilion located not too far from the residence of the Marquis of Ning, which had several connecting corridors and was surrounded by trees and flowers.

Because the number of visitors who had come with one excuse or another had grown drastically in the past few days, even if they were repeatedly turned down, they kept finding new reasons to come back, and so to avoid the trouble, Mei Changsu had simply found this conveniently-located pavilion, and, wrapped in his furs and with a warm brazier nearby, sat here reading idly.

Those who wanted to come take a look were led over by Xie Bi, and once they had satisfied their curiosity from a distance, they quickly left, and in this way, they had gotten rid of many of the visitors.

But there were always a few who weren't content to simply gaze from afar, and they found ways to break through Xie Bi's resistance to come closer for a good look.

Unfortunately, Mei Changsu's bodyguard, who could hold his own against Meng Zhi, was certainly not just there for decoration, and catching and throwing out those who dared to trespass into the forbidden inner area was Fei Liu's favourite game of the past few days, so long as he remembered not to hurt anyone.

"I think that's all the visitors we're going to get for today.

It's too cold here, Brother Su, let's go back to Snow Cottage."

Xiao Jingrui watched as Mei Changsu once again drew the collar of his fur cloak closer, and couldn't help himself.

Mei Changsu slowly shook his head and smiled faintly, then spoke of an entirely different matter: "Jingrui, is that child, Tingsheng, doing well?"

"Oh?"

Xiao Jingrui said in astonishment.

"You only asked me to go see him this morning, how did you know I had already gone?"

"The bottoms of your shoes are covered in red sand, the kind that is only found in Prince Jing's training grounds.

If you had not gone, where would you have picked that up?"

Because Mei Changsu often somehow managed to know things no one would expect him to know, Xiao Jingrui was not surprised that he would remember the colour of the sand of Prince Jing's training grounds, and he only lifted his foot for a look, saying, "I was going to tell you tonight, Tingsheng looks very well.

There's a huge courtyard in the back of Prince Jing's residence, which has always been used to house the orphans of the soldiers who die in battle.

Tingsheng is staying there, and has his own room, has masters to teach him, is eating well and sleeping well, and is not mistreated by anyone, so you don't need to worry."

A look of approval appeared in Mei Changsu's eyes.

Prince Jing was intelligent indeed, to not give Tingsheng any special treatment but allow him to disappear into the crowd, and only train him personally in secret – this was indeed the best he could have done with the situation.

"Tingsheng is a child who remembers those who were kind to him, and he purposefully came to ask me about your health, and said that he hopes one day to return to your side to learn from you, and even gave me a gift to bring over to you...."

Xiao Jingrui pulled out a small pouch and opened it, revealing an eagle carved from tree roots, and although the handiwork was rough, it was nonetheless an interesting trinket.

Mei Changsu took one glance at the object in Xiao Jingrui's hand and smiled.

"He is very thoughtful.

Fei Liu is over there on that old cedar, you can give it to him yourself."

"Eh?"

Xiao Jingrui was once again surprised.

"How did you know this gift was for Fei Liu?"

"You can tell at a glance," Mei Changsu couldn't help smiling.

"If he had really wanted to give me something, he would not have chosen this.

Fei Liu taught the children for two days, and Tingsheng came to like him very much.

I often saw them sitting together carving toys just like this."

“You really don’t miss a thing.”

Xiao Jingrui looked at him and smiled.

Now that he thought about it, since the day they had met, Mei Changsu’s attitude towards people and his methods of handling different situations had not changed much, and since he had not changed, then his own dissatisfaction was only a single-sided demand, so how could he put the blame for this on Mei Changsu?

Yan Yujin was right, he had treated Brother Su as the kindest teacher and greatest friend in the whole world because Brother Su had always had this capacity and status.

But on the other hand, if, by now, Xiao Jingrui still had not been able to achieve the same status in Brother Su’s heart, then this was his own problem, and complaining about the other person’s coldness was really too unfair.

After thinking it through, the turmoil in his heart calmed, and he took a deep breath, feeling his chest loosen.

Brother Su’s eyes, which held a faint smile, were just as warm as always.

Looking towards the old cedar tree that Mei Changsu had just pointed out, Xiao Jingrui wrapped up the little tree root eagle, turned, and strode over, lifting his head to say, “Fei Liu!

Come down and see, what’s this?”

Amidst the depths of the old cedar, which had not seemed as if it had a single branch out of place, a handsome face suddenly appeared, and Fei Liu widened his eyes and peered down.

“Oh, it’s a gift from your little friend....”

Xiao Jingrui raised his arm and waved it gently.

“What?”

“Come down and see, you’ll know if you come down.”

Because Fei Liu had gotten used to him, Xiao Jingrui had started to become a gege to him, seeing past the stony exterior to the innocence of the young child beneath.

“What?”

Fei Liu repeated, indignant over the gentle teasing.

“Not coming down?”

Then I’m taking it away....”

Xiao Jingrui put the bag behind his back and made as if to leave.

In the next instant, Fei Liu’s feet struck the ground and he somersaulted over.

Xiao Jingrui faltered for a step and then dodged, twisting his body as he flipped away in another direction.

In the matter of practicing martial artistry, the skills themselves had to be taught, and expertise and inner strength developed through training, but the movements themselves – well, being chased by a master of masters was undoubtedly the best kind of practice, eliciting hidden potential one might not even know he had.

Mei Changsu watched the chase from afar, seeing Fei Liu catch Xiao Jingrui and grab the small bag, pulling out the little eagle and disappearing again into the tree branches, and felt a sense of peace in his heart, a small smile appearing on his face.

But the smile disappeared quickly.

A sense of oppression came drifting over slowly, and he instinctively lifted his head, his gaze falling onto the small bridge on the eastern side of the pavilion.

On the bridge, a long silhouette stood quietly, his features difficult to make out because of the distance.

The only thing certain was that this person was studying him closely.

The visitor he had been waiting for all day had finally arrived.

Mei Changsu stood up slowly, the snowy white fur around his neck sliding off his shoulders, as the cold wind blew across the skin outside his collar, and though it did not resemble the once-familiar sensation of the sandstorms outside the Great Wall, it was nonetheless sharp like the stabbing of knives.

Seeing Mei Changsu rise, the figure did not continue standing still, but turned and strode down the little bridge, entering into the adjoining pavilion.

With each step he took, the figure's appearance became a little clearer to the eyes of the chief of the East River Alliance.

Unlike the time in the grasslands to the west of the city, Xia Dong was now dressed in a lady's attire, and although they were still sturdy clothes with narrow sleeves and boots, the embroidery on her collar and the tassels on her waist had successfully tempered some of the mysterious air given off by her masculine features, and instead displayed some of her prettiness and charm.

Only her long, smooth hair remained tied back by a ribbon, without any hairpins, and the white amidst the sea of raven-black showed up clearly to the eye.

Under Mei Changsu's quiet gaze, the lady officer of the Xuanjing Bureau strode towards the pavilion, when she suddenly turned gracefully, the dark eyes under her thin brows glancing up, and raised a hand to block the descending strike, which was Fei Liu's silent, swift attack that had sliced down so neatly that it had not disturbed even one unnecessary molecule of air.

Amidst the rapid strikes and attacks, Xia Dong laughed loudly and shouted, "Good body movements!"

In a fight between top martial artists, breath and endurance are vitally important, and the fact that she had been able to shout out praise amidst Fei Liu's suffocating attack showed her proud

temperament, as well as her attempt at provoking her opponent to open his mouth, so that she could seize the opportunity to attack and look for his weak spots.

Unfortunately, Fei Liu was no ordinary opponent.

He had learned from an early age to endure silently and remain unyielding and resolute, and to attack ferociously to seek out his opponent's weaknesses.

When Xia Dong spoke, the rhythm of her breathing was slightly altered, as if a golden net being attacked by knives had suddenly shown a rip, and Fei Liu broke through the weakness of her defense and forced her back towards the east side of the courtyard.

As to the challenging tone in Xia Dong's voice, the youth had not paid even the slightest bit of attention.

By this time, Xiao Jingrui had hurried back to Mei Changsu's side, and seeing the two engaged in fierce combat, he said hurriedly, "Brother Su, tell Fei Liu to stop, quickly, that person is...."

"The martial arts passed down in the Xuanjing Bureau are truly incredible," Mei Changsu smiled faintly, his tone leisurely.

"Even after making a mistake, they can retreat without losing.

If Langya Hall had not received the imperial order long ago that Xuanjing officers were not to be placed onto their lists, there would undoubtedly always be one or more of them on the top ten list of martial arts experts."

"Xuanjing officers aren't allowed to be ranked on the list?"

Xiao Jingrui had never heard of such a thing, and was greatly astonished.

"No wonder, I'd always thought it was because their work was shrouded in secrecy, and Langya Hall couldn't obtain any information on their fighting skills."

Mei Changsu smiled and said, “You underestimate Langya Hall.

But Xuanjing officers seldom involve themselves in the affairs of the jianghu world, and work in the shadows even in the palace, so not being placed on the lists is a good decision.”

“With Fei Liu’s skills, why isn’t he on the list?”

“Fei Liu never used to leave home much, he will be on the list next year.”

Mei Changsu sighed and said, “If only there was a way to ask the master of Langya Hall not to place him on the list, Fei Liu is still a child....”

“That would not be easy, here in the capital, Fei Liu has fought against many experts, and I fear he has long since been...oh!”

Xiao Jingrui interrupted himself with a cry.

“Since Brother Su knows who she is, then hurry and tell Fei Liu to stop!

How could I have kept chatting with you so idly....”

But Mei Changsu shook his head and said calmly, “Let them fight, I won’t stop them.”

“Brother Su....”

“Fei Liu has been instructed long ago not to hurt anyone, what are you afraid of?”

Mei Changsu continued indifferently, “The skills and intentions of Xuanjing officers are difficult to predict.

If I tell Fei Liu to stop, he will really stop, and if his opponent suddenly lost her temper, wouldn’t that be dangerous for Fei Liu?”

His words caused Xiao Jingrui to hesitate.

As he watched, Mei Changsu slowly returned to his long bench and picked up the fur collar that had slipped off when he stood up, his actions leisurely, and knew that he really wouldn’t stop them.

But he himself couldn't quite bear to do the same, and so he only coughed, and then chased over to where the two were still fighting, and called in a loud voice, "Xia Dong jie, will you stop first then?"

But the competitive nature of Xia Dong, who rarely met a worthy opponent, had been stirred, and she ignored him, but kicked back with one foot and raised a great wind, putting all her strength into the "Jiang Flow" attack passed down amongst her masters, sweeping her arms in one great circle and sending a great wave of energy spinning towards Fei Liu.

The youth's cold expression finally showed a shred of emotion, but that emotion was not fear, but rather even more easiness, as his whole body dodged the whirling gust of unimaginable power, like a falling leaf drifting from a tree branch, and his hands reached into the colourless, shapeless blur of motion, slicing neatly onto Xia Dong's wrists.

Everything ended abruptly, one moment the air was filled with flying silhouettes, and the next, the two had already landed far apart, watching each other warily.

Xia Dong's left hand was clasped over her right wrist, and her expression was calm, although her face was pale, and she was panting almost inaudibly.

Fei Liu looked just the same as always, his face cold and hard, his eyes expressionless, as he pointed at Xia Dong's feet and said rigidly, "Can stand here!"

Xiao Jingrui stared from one to the other, completely speechless.

If there were a mirror in front of him, he would have seen only one word on his own face – shock!

Although he had known all along that Fei Liu's martial art skills were exceedingly high, although he had known all along that this youth's abilities far exceeded his own, but...but...this was Xia

Dong, a Xuanjing officer of more than a decade, a recognized expert in both the palace and Jianghu.

And this young Fei Liu, this youth who was at heart like a little child, this boy who could often be found snuggled up at his gege's knee, had actually beaten her!

Compared to Xiao Jingrui's expression of utter shock, Xia Dong herself was much calmer.

She first gathered her inner energy and dispersed the hurt in her wrist, smoothed her hair which had been disturbed in the fight, and then, with a small smile at the corner of her lips, said, "Mister Su, please forgive Xia Dong's recklessness."

Mei Changsu's voice drifted over leisurely: "Fei Liu, let this jiejie come over."

Fei Liu immediately pointed in Mei Changsu's direction and said, "Go over!"

Those who knew him naturally understood his nature, but in the eyes of those who did not, this kind of curt speech was incredibly impolite, and Xiao Jingrui hurried forward to say, "Xia Dong jie, don't mind him, Fei Liu has always been short of speech, and doesn't mean to be discourteous."

Xia Dong was of course astute, and after a detailed glance following the fight, had understood Fei Liu's abnormalities and so was not angry, but strode away to the pavilion.

Mei Changsu had risen to greet his guest, and smilingly invited Xia Dong to sit down at the little table in the pavilion, then went over to the brazier placed to one side and lifted the cover of the copper teapot and peered into its depths, then said with a smile, "Seven parts snow, three parts clear dew, the water is freshly boiled, would you care for a cup?"

"Thank you."

Xia Dong answered peacefully.

By this time, Fei Liu had disappeared into who knew which tree to play.

Xiao Jingrui was a most considerate and sensitive person, and knowing that Xia Dong wasn't simply here out of curiosity like the other visitors, but had her own reasons, he made some excuse about having arranged to see some friends and left quickly.

And so in the pavilion, there now remained only the two persons.

Mei Changsu warmed the teacups, then measured out an exact amount of tea leaves with his instruments, poured in boiling water, removed the layer of froth, then poured away the first cup of water and steeped a second cup, waited a few moments, and then offered it to his guest with both hands.

Xia Dong accepted it with both hands, inhaled the sweet fragrance, and gently took a sip, letting the taste linger in her tongue and throat, and closed her eyes to enjoy the tea, not saying a word, as if she had truly been invited there simply to drink tea.

She did not say anything, and Mei Changsu also did not speak, but smilingly drank his own tea.

After the hot tea had been consumed, his originally pale face showed a hint of pink, and he looked refined and elegant.

Xia Dong looked at him for a moment, then said with a soft sigh, "I have some blunt words, I hope you will forgive me."

"Officer Xia Dong does not need to be polite," Mei Changsu addressed her respectfully, his tone pleasant.

"Please speak freely."

"Mister Su is certainly an extraordinary talent, and I cannot see your intentions clearly.

But...no matter what kind of person you are, I think there are only two options."

"Ah," Mei Changsu smiled, "Please continue."

“You are either a refined and elegant scholar, or a shrewd and sophisticated strategist, but no matter which, you are not a suitable match for Princess Nihuang.”

Mei Changsu's smile did not falter, as he said softly, “Could it be that Officer Xia has come today after hearing some rumor about my being the Princess' chosen future husband, and so wanted some clarification?”

Xia Dong smiled, “That is indeed my intention, but it is not because of some rumors.”

“Oh?”

“I have known Princess Nihuang for many years, and am familiar with her temper and character.

Without some special reason, even if you were the apple of His Majesty's eye, or indeed of the princes' eyes, she would not have given you such preferential treatment.”

At this point, Xia Dong's eyes suddenly became cold.

“But towards the Princess' special favour, your response has been disappointing, and in fact, one could say you have not returned the favour in any way, which I cannot understand.

There are some in the Mu residence who feel the same as I do, that Mister Su has come across rather arrogant, and has not been polite enough.”

A bitter smile floated across Mei Changsu's face, and he raised his cup and took a sip, then said slowly, “Officer Xia...I will be blunt as well, you are wrong.”

“Wrong?”

“The Princess is exceptional and elegant, with such a graceful manner.

I am neither deaf nor blind, how could I remain unaffected?

But...I am on the one hand sick and frail, and unlikely to live

long, and have no intention to wed because I do not wish such a husband on any young lady, much less the Princess.

And on the other hand, even if I had such intentions, I fear the Princess would not have such a wish.

As Officer Xia has said, no matter what kind of person I am, I am not suited to the Princess.

Officer Xia knows this, so how could the Princess herself not know?

A person she could hold in her heart must be a righteous warrior, a proud young man, who can ride with her onto the sands of battle, and fight by her side to defeat the enemies of our kingdom; how could she consider someone like me, frail and weak, without the slightest hint of a hero's air?"

"But Nihuang...."

"Princess Nihuang has indeed treated me with unusual kindness, but the reason for this is not that which has been guessed by everyone."

Mei Changsu put down his tea cup and stretched his hands towards the warmth of the fire.

"Officer Xia, as an officer of the Xuanjing Bureau, has unusual methods, and must have thoroughly investigated my background, have you not?"

Xia Dong nodded slowly and said, "That's right.

I was shocked to see how young the chief of the East River Alliance was."

Mei Changsu gazed at the white steam of his own breath and said, "The Princess is also aware of my identity.

And the reason she has treated me so favourably is only this, and none other."

Xia Dong raised an eyebrow in confusion.

“Although the East River Alliance is the greatest sect in the world, and has some influence, but, if you don’t mind my saying so, it is in the end only a jianghu sect.

With the Princess’ rank, as the commander of hundred thousand soldiers, could your identity really impress her?”

“When has the Princess been impressed?”

Mei Changsu laughed in spite of himself.

“I would not dare to think like this.

But as I have said, the Princess’ preferential treatment towards me is due to my identity as the chief of the East River Alliance, and that is the truth.”

Xia Dong frowned.

“The world is not full of people as intelligent as Mister Su.

Could you speak more clearly?”

Mei Changsu slowly sat up, took out a few cakes of incense from his sleeve and dropped them into the fire, then picked up the small stove he had been cradling all along, lifted its lid, and placed a few fresh pieces of burning hot coal into it, then wrapped his hands around it again and shifted to a more comfortable position on the long bench, finally saying with a smile, “Although the weather is dismal, with a fragrant stove and good tea at hand, this is quite pleasant.

If Officer Xia is not in any rush, would you be willing to sit awhile longer in this pavilion, and listen to a story?”

Chapter 36: Wounds of the Past

Xia Dong's gaze lingered on Mei Changsu's pale complexion, and only lowered after a long moment.

Before she had arrived at the residence of the Marquis of Ning today, she had wondered what kind of a person this Su Zhe was, but now that she had finally met him, she realized that he was even deeper and more profound than she had imagined from the rumors.

"Since Mister Su has such leisure, Xia Dong is of course happy to listen."

Mei Changsu nodded in her direction, then turned his head, turning his gaze away from his only audience and towards the twilight-lit sky outside, and began to speak at a steady pace, neither too quickly nor too slowly.

"Once, in a certain kingdom, at a certain time, there was a mighty lord, who guarded the kingdom's border with his army, and who was much favoured by the Emperor, and trusted beyond measure.

One year, the daughter of this lord entered the capital, and the little princess stayed at the palace, where she came to know many of the children of the royal family and relations.

One of these children was the only son of the great general of the court, who was her elder by two years, a lively and mischievous boy, proud and willful, and the two spent much of their time together.

The Grand Empress Dowager saw the two innocent playmates together, and decided to arrange for their marriage.

Although there was no deep friendship between the lord and the general, the match was an appropriate one, and neither families objected.

Who could have guessed that, a year after the engagement, the great general was involved in a rebellion, and both father and son lost their lives.

Although the lord was far away at the border and had had nothing to do with the case, he could not avoid being implicated due to the ties between the two families.

The Emperor began to grow suspicious of him, and in all matters whether military or otherwise, no longer treated him as freely as before, and two years of this wearing and tearing began to affect his military strength.

It was at this time that the neighboring kingdoms suddenly launched a furious attack on the border, and the lord lost the first battle, and lost his life in the second, leaving behind his orphaned daughter and young son, his army without their general, and a grief of unfathomable depths in all their hearts.

At that time, reinforcements had not yet arrived in the south, and the situation was growing desperate, when the seventeen-year-old little princess rose up and went to battle in her mourning clothes, leading the army in her father's stead, and after a blood-soaked and hard-fought struggle, managed to secure the kingdom's border.

Officer Xia, wouldn't you say this little princess is truly an extraordinary lady of our age?"

Xia Dong's eyes were hidden as she sighed without speaking.

It was as if she had been transported back to the day she had arrived in the south with the reinforcement troops, and seen on the city wall this young lady, dressed all in white, her face full of unswerving determination.

Although she was ten years her senior, although she had ample experience and knowledge of worldly affairs from her years in the Xuanjing Bureau, after going through those days of hardship and

perils together, she only had two words to describe her feelings for the strength of this young lady: deepest respect.

Were it not for the barrier of blood and betrayal between them, the friendship between Xuanjing Officer Xia Dong and Princess Nihuang would have undoubtedly been every bit as strong as the life-and-death brotherhoods often forged between young men.

Mei Changsu only briefly glanced at her expression, and then went on, “The danger had been averted for the time being, but the situation was far from stable.

The princess had established her authority with one battle, and the soldiers of the border army knelt to her without exception.

The court could not find anyone better suited to the position, and so allowed her to retain the temporary post of commander of the border army.

Over the next ten years, as she faced countless dangers alone, people only saw the brilliant power and influence she commanded from her loyal army, while no one noticed the suffering and pressure she kept within her heart.

Most do not even know that, just two years ago, she once again came face to face with a dangerous situation from which there was almost no escape.”

At this point, Xia Dong was visibly horrified.

“Why have I never heard of such an event?”

Mei Changsu’s calm gaze did not waver, as he continued in his steady tone, “The Princess and her generals and troops are skilled in field battles, excelling in both defense and offense, and are bold and powerful masters of the art of warfare, but they have one weakness, and that is battles fought over water.”

Xia Dong was fairly familiar with the Yunnan army, and couldn’t help nodding in agreement.

“The danger at the time was because a certain master in a neighbouring country had designed a particularly ruthless battle over water.

First, they launched a surprise attack and took control of the mouth of the river, and then, using the largest warship as their base of attack, the smaller warships as their attack force, and the river as the road for their supply chain, their vast navy charged up the river to attack the inland.

Although it was a dangerous gamble, it had the desired effect.

If the Princess put her whole strength into attacking the mouth of the river, the enemy’s navy would be free to wreck havoc on the inland, but if she met the enemy head-on on the water, she would be fighting the enemy’s strength with her weakness, and despite the fact that there was no lack of talented generals in her army at the time, none could devise a plan to defeat the enemy.

As the sole commander, one can only imagine the worry in the Princess’ heart at that time.”

At this point, he coughed a few times, and stopped to take a sip of tea.

“What happened next?”

Xia Dong was listening intently, and seeing him pause, couldn’t help herself.

“Just when the situation seemed hopeless, a young man appeared in the camp, claiming to be an expert in water battles, and begged for an audience with the Princess to share his expertise.

The Princess is an insightful and perceptive judge of character, and she made an exception for him.

It turned out that this person had not exaggerated in the least, and was truly a water battle prodigy.

After half a month of careful planning, he entered the battle

himself and defeated the enemy in one blow.

Afterwards, when she was writing her report to the palace, the Princess wanted to give him the credit and ensure he received the deserved honour and rewards, but for some unknown reason, the person firmly refused to allow the Princess to put down his name on the report.”

“Oh?”

Xia Dong was surprised.

“He wasn’t interested in the rewards of his work?

That’s strange indeed.”

“Perhaps this person was not interested in advancing into the court.”

Mei Changsu said dismissively, and then continued, “For the next half year, this young man stayed in the Princess’ camp, and re-designed the training of her navy to compensate for their prior weakness.

This person had a bright nature, was handsome and righteous, and was also extremely charming, and the two were of similar age, and so, as the days went by, they naturally developed feelings towards one another, but unfortunately the time was not right, and they did not express their feelings to each other, which was a pity indeed.”

At this point, Xia Dong thought a moment, and suddenly became furious.

Since they had both developed feelings, then the Princess’ open competition for her hand in marriage was the perfect opportunity for the Princess to have her wish granted, but this person had not appeared, how heartless and ungrateful of him!

Xia Dong had always been inclined to fight in the face of injustice, and since this matter was about the Princess, how could

she not be angry?

She immediately stood and said with a tight expression, “Who is this person?

Where is he now?”

Mei Changsu did not directly answer her question, but only lowered his head, and continued to tell the story at a steady pace, speaking in a voice that grew lower and lower.

“One day, half a year later, the young man suddenly disappeared without a farewell, leaving behind only a letter addressed to the Princess, on which was written: “The Alliance summons me back; I obey and return.”

The Princess was furious that he had left in such a way and tore up the letter, giving orders that he was not to be followed.

But her brother couldn't bear it and sent highly-skilled men to follow him all the way back, but after entering Tu province, the young man disappeared without a trace, not leaving behind even the slightest hint of where he had gone.”

Xia Dong, being clever and perceptive, immediately grasped the key point.

“Tu province is in Jiangzuo territory, and in the fourteen provinces controlled by Jiangzuo Alliance, when has there ever been another sect?”

Mei Changsu neither confirmed nor denied her words, but kept speaking.

“Another year passed, and the Mu household had still not been able to find a single hint of news about this young man.

Although the Princess was silent on the matter, everyone in her household felt this person had behaved coldly and unkindly, and couldn't understand the matter at all.

At this time, the Princess' younger brother came of age and they

had returned to the capital for his inheritance ceremonies, when the court decided to have an open competition to choose the Princess' husband, and asked her opinion on the matter.

Everyone thought that, with the Princess' pride, she would never consent to such a public method, and never expected her to agree after setting a few conditions of her own."

Xia Dong's emotions were stirred, and sorrow filled her heart as she let out a sigh, saying with a lonely expression, "Women's infatuation is stronger than men's.

Although she gave no outward sign of it, in her heart, she must have been hoping that the young man would take this chance to come forward...."

Mei Changsu did not answer, but there was a bleak expression on his face.

Up until this point, the story was only half over, but who could know in what direction the rest of it would go?

The clouds at the edge of the sky had sunk lower and lower; the solstice was not far away, and wind and snow were rising with the night.

Xia Dong put down her teacup, stood up, and strode to the edge of the pavilion, looking out.

Against the sky full of dark shadows, her tall figure appeared tough and vigorous, and there was no expression on her handsome face, which appeared now to be in deep thought, and now to be simply breathing steadily and not thinking at all.

But the calm before the storm never lasts for long, and a moment later, she drew in a deep breath, then turned and strode back towards Mei Changsu, a fiery gaze in her eyes as she said in a furious voice, "Since you know this story, then tell me, since they both loved each other, why didn't he come?!"

"Why didn't he come?"

Mei Changsu gave her a distressed smile, his face pale as snow, then slowly closed his eyes, murmuring as if to himself, “You ask me this...but me...how can I ask him?”

Since they both loved each other, why didn't he come?

Why didn't he come?

Because another person, who had long since fallen into hell, still walked on this earth, and so, he could only struggle in pain and suffer his torment in silence.

To that young man, the love between man and woman was as beautiful as pure water, but the friendship between brothers, how was that not also as precious as gold or jade?

Even the most carefree, innocent person in the world would not betray that brotherhood, nor wish to bring the slightest shame to a friend.

But love has never been something that can be hidden or avoided, and though on the surface, the young man talked and laughed as cheerfully as before, he could not hide the hurt and grief within his heart.

Just as, when the Princess first saw himself, the chief of Jiangzuo Alliance, that day at Yingfeng House, and countless painful questions rose to the tip of her tongue, the strong, calm mask had slipped for a moment, and revealed the turmoil of the emotions beneath.

When he had first sent the young man to help Nihuang, he had indeed not foreseen such an outcome, but now that he was faced with these two hearts as clear and true as snow, how could he let the old wishes and memories of his own heart stand as a barrier between them?

Lin Shu's fate had long since been filled with trouble and misfortune, and for the sake of a marriage agreement made in their youth, he had already brought Nihuang many years of grief;

now, with his frail and weak body, his fragile lifespan, and a future full of hardship, he no longer had even the slightest energy left to spare on rekindling a childhood passion....

And therefore, the reason he had waited and prepared for Xia Dong's arrival today, was for this matter of the heart.

“Officer Xia.” When Mei Changsu opened his eyes again, there was only peace and warmth in his gaze.

He gently turned to look at Xia Dong, his voice steady and serene.

“I do not know the Princess well, so am not at convenience to say some things, and the reason I have waited for you here today and told you this story is because I would ask you to carry a message for me:

although the Princess has hesitated all this time and has not asked me directly, I know the questions in her heart.

That young man is indeed in my Jiangzuo Alliance, and previously, I was not clear about the wishes of the Princess, and was afraid to cause a misunderstanding, and so did not question him closely.

But now that I have known the Princess for a time, I have come to understand what I must understand.

Please ask the Princess not to worry, the wishes of this person's heart have certainly not faded in the least compared to her own, and it is only that he is currently held under certain responsibilities, and cannot enter the capital at present.

If the Princess trusts me, please allow him a little more time, as a thanks to me.”

After hearing this, Xia Dong did not react immediately, but thought for a long moment, and then asked frowning, “Gentlemen should be more straightforward, if he loves her, he loves her, and if he does not, then he does not.

What incredible responsibilities must he have, that he cannot come to Jinling even for a few days?”

Mei Changsu did not explain further, but only said quietly, “The lives of those in jianghu do not belong to themselves, pray Officer Xia forgive us.”

Xia Dong scoffed, but continued, “Since this matter concerns the Princess, and you have related it all so plainly, it is no trouble for me to pass along your message.

But you must also tell that fellow, when I see him in the future, I will not let him go so easily.”

Mei Changsu smiled.

“The Princess is fortunate to have such a good friend as Officer Xia.”

At his words, Xia Dong’s face suddenly became like ice, and she replied coldly, “She is not my friend now, only once she marries will I claim her as a friend.”

“Really?”

Mei Changsu seemed not to care much about her words, continuing indifferently, “Is it because of her engagement from all those years ago?

As long as the Princess does not marry, then she is still of the Lin family.

And to Officer Xia, isn’t anyone from the Lin family your sworn enemy under heaven?”

He spoke the words carelessly, but Xia Dong’s whole body stiffened, and her eyelashes trembled violently.

She was not surprised that Mei Changsu knew about this, because although this old case had been purposefully diluted by the court over the years, it was nonetheless a matter that had involved tens of thousands of people, and with Jiangzuo Alliance’s power, it

could be easily uncovered with some careful searching.

What had shocked her were her own feelings upon hearing those words, the flow of uncontrollable emotions that had welled up in her heart.

Despite the fact that more than twelve years had gone by, despite the fact that she no longer woke from nightmares shaking and in tears, all these years of training herself into calmness had not brought about a shred of true closure.

This refined scholar had only mentioned these two words – “Lin family” – and the bleeding pain and bone-deep hatred had been rekindled within her heart, like the strip of white in the sea of raven-black hair, forever bright and unable to remain hidden no matter where she went.

Mei Changsu turned his gaze away from Xia Dong, as if he couldn't stand to see the fragile expression that had appeared on her face.

As a Xuanjing officer, Xia Dong was naturally the strongest among the strong, but when you removed her sturdy mask, she was still one of the thousands of grieving victims who had been left behind by the tragedy.

He remembered Xia Dong as she had been when she was newly-married, fresh with youth and beauty, full of vitality, who had removed her wedding veil and immediately abandoned etiquette, leaving her bridal chamber to find her husband and drink his toasts in his place.

The couple stood under the light of the bright red candles, one a general of the Chiyan Army, one a distinguished apprentice of the Xuanjing Bureau, the hall filled with the laughter and blessings of her seniors and the warm congratulations of his brothers in the army.

This joy and blessing should have lasted much longer, but seven

years of love had turned to ashes overnight.

It was as if he could see in the distance the reluctant parting of these two persons, and then turning around, there she stood, a widow of twelve years.

Fortunately, she was Xia Dong, and the responsibilities and steadfast devotion of her position as a Xuanjing officer helped her overcome those days, and she never showed her grief or pain in front of her brothers and seniors in the bureau;

unfortunately, she was Xia Dong, and in the confusion of the days that followed, everyone was reassured by her strength, until the day they saw the whiteness on her forehead and the ice in her gaze, and realized the depth of the anger and sorrow in her heart.

Perhaps only Princess Nihuang understood a bit of Xia Dong's emotions.

The young girl who had been forced to grow up all at once, who had been the proudest, strongest lady in the world, nonetheless patiently withstood all of Xia Dong's insults and barbed words in the first days of their acquaintance, and after the two had fought shoulder to shoulder and developed a deep friendship, still quietly bore her cold promise: "As long as you do not wed, you are not my friend."

But Mei Changsu knew, if anyone in this world were to mistreat Princess Nihuang, Xia Dong would be the first to step forward.

Whether she married or not, whether she was in name the daughter-in-law of the Lin family or not, she was still Xia Dong's closest friend.

Because friendships forged in the fires of battle are the most enduring, unchanging bonds in the world.

"Mister Su,"

Xia Dong had taken her emotions under control again, and continued coldly, "Why did you come to the capital?"

Mei Changsu answered with a smile, “What, Officer Xia has not even found this out?”

Xia Dong made a dismissive noise and said, “I know the saying about the qilin prodigy, and I know you harbour great ambitions and will soon choose your lord.

But what I don’t understand is, even if you participate in the fight between the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, you still do not need to investigate the matters of the past so carefully.”

Mei Changsu seemed not to notice her cold attitude, and continued smiling.

“Every moment of the present was formed from the events of the past; if one does not investigate and understand the past clearly, how can one know what should be done, and what should not be done?

No matter how many years have passed, the seeds that were sown will determine the fruit that is reaped.

Haven’t Xuanjing officers always striven for justice and fairness in their actions because of this belief?”

“The events of the past naturally have their significance, but I do not understand what they have to do with you.”

Xia Dong’s sharp glance pierced through Mei Changsu.

“Could it be that this old case of twelve years past can affect the Crown Prince and Prince Yu’s fights in the palace today?”

“As long as there is a connection, there will be some impact, no matter how small.

Unless Officer Xia believes they had nothing to do with the events of that year?”

Mei Changsu asked placidly in return.

The lady Xuanjing Officer murmured in reply, “Yes, I admit they added fuel to the fire, and hastened Prince Qi’s demise, but had it

not been for Prince Qi's own wild ambitions and rebellious conspiracies, and had the Chiyan Army not supported him in his tyranny and acted so despicably, there would also not have followed the natural consequences of their crimes."

Mei Changsu's face did not change, but his teeth were gritted, and after a long moment, he let out a sigh and said, "I suppose... this is the reason for the animosity between you and Prince Jing?"

Xia Dong stared at him and asked in a low voice, "What do you mean?"

"Officer Xia has never doubted the court's verdict regarding the case of Prince Qi's rebellion, but Prince Jing has argued for Prince Qi all along, and were it not for the Emperor's decree for mercy and the investigation revealing that he only spoke out of brotherly love and was in no way involved in the rebellion, he would have long since been convicted along with the rest.

But even so, he has nonetheless been heavily stifled, and has not been raised to the rank of a Royal Prince despite more than a decade of successful field battles, so that neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu have paid him any mind at all.

The two of you hold opposing views, and whenever you see each other, if the matter is carelessly raised, it would be difficult to avoid conflict.

So you have both avoided meeting face to face whenever possible."

Mei Changsu met Xia Dong's gaze.

"Have I guessed correctly?"

Xia Dong gazed back at him steadily, now as if examining him closely, now as if she had no other intention, but did not deny it in the end, and answered calmly, "His Highness Prince Jing is a prince, and I will not provoke him if at all possible.

He chooses to ignore the truth, and is biased towards traitors, but

His Majesty has already decided to be generous, so what can I do?”

Mei Changsu turned and filled her cup with hot tea, saying, “So according to Officer Xia, it must be Prince Jing who is wrong?”

“Of course it is Prince Jing who is wrong.”

Xia Dong’s gaze was hard as iron.

“Since Mister Su has purposefully investigated this old case, do you know who was responsible for the investigation of Prince Qi’s rebellion?”

Mei Changsu’s mouth tightened imperceptibly, but when he turned his head, his expression was once again serene as a cool breeze, and he said smiling, “Surely everyone knows this, it was the current Head Officer of the Xuanjing Bureau, your teacher-master, Head Officer Xia Jiang.”

Hearing the name ‘Xia Jiang’, Xia Dong’s gaze became respectful, and her tone took on a new confidence.

“Since Teacher began his work in the bureau, he has assisted His Majesty and investigated countless cases under imperial command, and has not made a single mistake to this day.

If Mister Su continues to speak of the case with doubt, I will consider it as disrespect towards my teacher.”

“I would not dare.”

Mei Changsu spread out his hands with a smile.

“Head Officer Xia has operated the Xuanjing Bureau with iron-like justice and is well-respected, how could someone such as I dare to doubt him?

It was only that as we spoke, we suddenly mentioned Prince Jing, and came to this point.

Pray Officer Xia, forgive me.”

“Mister Su is a scholar by birth, how have you come to be

interested in Prince Jing, who has always kept far away from the palace and the court?”

Mei Changsu turned his gaze slightly, and he said, “I will not speak in riddles before Officer Xia.

Prince Jing is a highly skilled martial fighter, a good military leader, and is a prince with no threat to the crown – he is undoubtedly an asset to anyone who could recruit him, no?”

Xia Dong looked at him for a moment, and suddenly burst into laughter, laughing until tears ran down her face.

“What, have you found my words amusing?”

“Are they not?”

Xia Dong gently wiped away the tears in her eyes and sat upright again.

“Although you are the qilin prodigy and know everything there is to know under heaven, although you hold the world’s greatest sect in your palm, with countless eyes and ears under your command, you investigate and understand the things of the past, but you have not understood the heart within a person.”

“Was I wrong?”

Prince Jing has been tightly suppressed by His Majesty, and his consort-mother has no special honour or favour in the palace, so even if he is not interested in glory and riches, for the sake of the future, he should put his skills to good use now and make a decision.

If he continues to watch from the sidelines, when the dust has settled, he will be of no use to anyone.”

Xia Dong laughed coldly.

“You are a strategist indeed, only caring about merits and drawbacks, and not paying attention to a person’s heart.

I do not dare to comment on anything else, but this I will say:

no matter whether you end up choosing the Crown Prince or Prince Yu as your lord, you will never be able to recruit Prince Jing into either of their camps.”

“Oh?”

Mei Changsu asked with a faint smile.

“Officer Xia is so certain?”

Nothing is certain, the situation is always changing, and the hearts of men naturally change as well; Prince Jing has spent many years defeated and hopeless, perhaps he would not so easily let go of such a golden opportunity?”

The corner of Xia Dong’s mouth turned down and she turned her head, as if unwilling to continue the conversation.

Although she was angry at Prince Jing Xiao Jingyan’s stubbornness these many years, at least the love and devotion he bore for his eldest brother Prince Qi and his friend Lin Shu ran true and deep, and the fact that he had never thought to distance himself from them out of fear of being implicated in their crimes had allowed Xia Dong to retain a shred of respect for him, and so she disliked Mei Changsu’s cool analysis, and didn’t answer any further.

But Mei Changsu’s chest warmed when he saw her reaction.

Although he had spoken those words in order to mislead the Xuanjing officer, to allow her to believe that all his interactions with Prince Jing in the future would be out of strategic intent and thus not worth her attention, when he saw Xia Dong, who had stood so firmly against Prince Qi and the Lin family for all these years, refuse to condemn Prince Jing for any of his actions over the years, he couldn’t help feeling touched.

Xiao Jingyan had persisted resolutely and hidden his fury for twelve years, and even in the face of increasingly unfair treatment, he had refused to bend, to kneel in repentance for the stance he

had taken all those years ago.

He was a military general of great prestige, and at his slightest expression of interest, both the Crown Prince and Prince Yu would have been delighted to take him under their wing; he was a grown prince with a formidable list of military merits, and if he were willing to lower his head and yield, the Emperor would not have hardened his heart for so many years and refused to reward him for his achievements.

But he had not done any of these seemingly simple things, but had silently accepted one imperial command after another, riding from battlefield to battlefield, and if he had any time to rest, he spent it either in his own mansion or in the military camp outside the city, far from the center of imperial power, and the only reason he had never been taken seriously by the court was because of this buried anger and resentment hidden within his heart.

But it was this Prince Jing Jingyan who had been the best friend of the Young Marshal of the Chiyan Army so many years ago, and it was this Prince Jing whom Mei Changsu was preparing to help to the throne today.

The peaceful, solemn gaze of the chief of Jiangzuo Alliance returned to the snowy twilight sky, stopping on the silver lining threading through a thick, dark cloud.

For Prince Jing, he had to gather all the power and strength he could find, and as he had already acquired the Yunnan Mu clan, next up was Xuanjing Officer Xia Dong.

The proud, smiling, Vanguard General of the Chiyan Army, Nie Feng, had been sent to his death by the cruel malice of his commander general; his entire troop had been surrounded, and afterwards, not even his bones had remained to be collected.

This conclusion was the thorn in the hearts of the surviving members of the Nie family, and was the source of Xia Dong's hatred.

She had sent off a handsome young hero, and had received in return his fragmented remains and torn, bloody robes.

Although she had the fame of her teacher's name, and the respect due to the status of a Xuanjing officer, how could this compare to the loneliness she felt, when she stood in front of his grave every Qingming, when she looked in a mirror and did not see his shadow beside hers, when she turned and his shoulder was not there for her to lean on?

Such heart-rending pain, such bone-deep enmity, how could she not be angry, how could she not hate?

As long as this knot remained unresolved, the Xuanjing Bureau was forever the sworn enemy of the Lin family.

But the old case had long been concluded, and although the current Xuanjing Head Officer, Xia Jiang, had retreated to live in seclusion, he was still alive, and it would not be easy to bring up again this bloody matter of the past.

They could only take things one step at a time, and make their plans slowly and patiently.

“I heard Officer Xia was ambushed outside the capital?”

Mei Changsu smilingly changed the subject.

“Jingrui came back wounded that day, and scared everyone in the Marquis' residence.

The Grand Princess ordered people to bring over doctors and medicine, and raised a great fuss....

Are your own wounds healing well?”

“What's a few injuries to boys of his age?

The Grand Princess spoils her children too much.”

Xia Dong said dismissively, “My injuries were light, and healed long ago.

Thank you for your concern.”

“But even newly healed wounds will affect mobility.

Just now, our Fei Liu behaved without manners, pray forgive us.”

When Fei Liu was mentioned, a fervent gaze passed over Xia Dong’s eyes.

“Your bodyguard certainly lives up to his fame.

I accept my loss today wholeheartedly.

But tell him not to grow complacent, we Xuanjing officers don’t give up so easily, and I will certainly practice harder and return in the future to learn from him again.”

Mei Changsu smiled and did not answer, but was not worried in the slightest.

Because Fei Liu was simple by nature, he was single-minded in his pursuits, and practiced while he played, and treated practice itself as play.

In addition, his martial arts skills were the best among the best, and even if others gave twice the effort he gave, they would still find it difficult to keep pace with his efforts.

Xia Dong finished her tea and returned her cup to the table, then stood up, saying, “Thank you for your hospitality.

What you have asked me to do, I will certainly accomplish without fail.

What you wish to do in the future is your own concern.

But I will give you this warning: since you have the world in your hands, please understand the net of the law, and understand the imperial wishes.

Otherwise, I fear the Xuanjing Bureau would not be able to tolerate you.”

“I will take Officer Xia’s words to heart.”

Mei Changsu rose to see her out, and said with a smile, “Officer Xia has spoken so earnestly, how could I not return the favour?”

So I, too, will speak a word of warning: the loyal may not be loyal, and the wicked may not be wicked;

a person of prestige and ranking in the palace, who yet understands the jianghu world and is able to command high level assassins without leaving a trace – how many such persons can there be?”

Xia Dong’s heart stopped, and she quickly turned her head, but only saw a peaceful expression on the other’s face, his gaze calm, as if his words a moment ago had only been idle chatter.

Under her questioning gaze, Mei Changsu did not show any intention of explaining further, but walked ahead to show her out.

His light “Officer Xia, take care” was sufficient to convey all the words he did not say.

Xia Dong had become an officer at age twenty, and had faced countless cases both trivial and important in her seventeen years as a Xuanjing officer, and so, just that one sentence had been enough of a hint towards the direction of her subsequent investigation, and to say anymore would have been redundant....

Fei Liu’s shadow flitted through the nearby trees and then appeared by Mei Changsu’s side, and although his face was expressionless, there was a look in his eyes that said he was glad the visitor was finally leaving.

Xia Dong turned, looking at his handsome, innocent face, and suddenly felt a wave of exhaustion overcome her heart.

The great case in her hands had not even been opened yet, and the tides of schemes and plots in the capital were already growing strong, threatening to sweep everything along in their wake, and made one feel not only helpless to resist, but inclined to hide.

Now, more than ever before, Xia Dong needed the steady reassurance of Nie Feng's arm.

Chapter 37: Wasted Manor

Because of the nature of their business, Xuanjing officers kept a low profile, and Xia Dong's return to the capital was no exception.

But to those who cared to find out, it was not difficult to keep track of her movements.

To those eyes that watched either openly or in secret, Xia Dong did not purposefully hide her actions, but went freely between the palace, the residence of the Marquis of Ning, and the Mu residence, and then afterwards, retreated deep into the residence of the Xuanjing officers and was seldom seen out again.

But what was surprising to both the court and commoners alike was that the expected bombshell of Xia Dong's return to the capital, the 'Land Infringement Case' had not exploded immediately; yet this 'calm before the storm' feeling was difficult to bear, and the old Duke of Qing had long since taken leave from the court and was lying sick at home, and according to the imperial physicians, his illness was no pretense.

Another event that everyone had been expecting also failed to materialize, as, although the reputed chosen husband was still staying as a guest at the Marquis of Ning's residence, and the Emperor had bestowed upon him two pieces of calligraphy and once summoned him into court to play the zither and have tea, there was nonetheless not the slightest whisper of an engagement.

Instead, Princess Nihuang, after being visited by Xia Dong, sent someone to deliver a letter to him.

No one could understand what these people were up to.

The Crown Prince, who had been confined for reflection, was on his best behaviour, and although he could not publicly apologize to the Princess because the true reason for the prior events had been concealed, whenever the people of the Eastern Palace met their

counterparts from the Mu household, they would bow and yield with extreme politeness, rendering the Mu household members, who had been brimming with fury, speechless instead, and so the relations between the two households did not publicly deteriorate.

Noble Consort Yue also milked her suffering for all it was worth, and her speedy transformation into a wan, sallow aging woman stirred up pity in the Emperor's heart, and his anger was no longer as great as it had been previously.

It was at this time, when events seemed to have slowed to a stop, that Su Zhe, who had become famous in the capital, leisurely chose a fine, sunny day, and invited several of his young friends to accompany him out.

Mottled white walls and crumbled ledges with the occasional gap in the walls, on which crawled a splendid mess of rose and ivy vines surrounded them.

Looking around, wild grass and half-dried lotus ponds filled the view as far as the eye could see, along with collapsed rock gardens and promenades covered in spider webs.

Only the outer wall, which was built along the sloping grounds, still stood firmly, surrounding this little manor which had been neglected for far too long.

In the middle of the manor, there seemed to be a silhouette of a curved flowerbed, which no longer held any flowers, but was instead overrun by weeds on yellow, withered soil.

It was on this wasted ground that several people stood in splendid clothing, forming quite a contrast to their surroundings, as they looked around, as if in admiration of the desolate view.

“If it were not for the fact that you can see the spire of Chongyin Tower if you look up, I really wouldn't know where I am....”

The speaker was the son of the Imperial Uncle, who stood handsomely with his fan despite the fact that it was winter.

“I never thought there was such a desolate place in the city of Jinling.

Brother Su, how did you find this place?”

“I did not find it myself,”

The young man who replied smiled ruefully.

“I only found an estate business and said I was looking to buy a manor in the city, and their boss recommended this place, and said it was very good....”

“Very good....”

Xie Bi echoed the two words, looking around dazedly, his gaze stopping at the half-collapsed flowerbed not far away.

“He said it was very good and you believed him?

Didn’t you look at the place before you paid?

Or is Jiangzuo Alliance really so rich nowadays?”

Ya Yujin fired off his questions, expressing his disapproval.

“I...I sent Fei Liu over for a look, he said it was very good too....”

“Very good...”

The echo came again, and Fei Liu’s figure flew by and disappeared into the maze of collapsed rock gardens, where he seemed to be playing with keen interest.

Yan Yujin crossed his arms and fixed his gaze on the refined gentleman.

Buying a house through an estate business and only sending a child over for a look before paying, this was how the qilin prodigy worked?

He really was different from normal people....

“Really, this place isn’t too bad,” Mei Changsu smiled.

“At least the location is good, and is overall appropriate, and as it

has not been lived in for awhile, it's no surprise that it has deteriorated to this degree.

I have only to have it cleaned up a bit, and it will be quite beautiful, and anyway, Fei Liu likes it too...don't you think so, Jingrui?"

The person who had not spoken a word until now gave an affirmative "Ng," as if in agreement.

"What?"

Xie Bi came closer.

"It's obvious Brother Su has been tricked into buying this place, so why do you look even more dismayed than he does?"

Yan Yujin glanced over at his friend, and did not join Xie Bi in teasing him as he had so often done before, but continued slowly hitting his closed fan against his palm, and wandered a few steps away, as if to inspect the manor more closely, but he had not gone far when, with a sudden "Oh!", he disappeared.

Everyone jumped in fright and ran over to the place where he had mysteriously vanished, and Xiao Jingrui's agility being the best, he naturally arrived first, shouting all the while, "Yujin! Yujin!"

"Here..."

A muffled voice drifted up from below ground.

"Give me a hand up...."

After Xiao Jingrui had pulled him up by the wrist, the son of the Imperial Uncle's splendid robes were caked with dark soil and withered grass, and as Xiao Jingrui brushed him off, the air filled with dust.

"It's a dried up well, looks rather cold and dark...."

Xie Bi carefully pulled aside the grass obscuring the mouth of the well and peered down.

“The well platform has completely eroded, it’s no wonder you didn’t notice it...”

“It’s a good thing I was quick and caught the edge,” Yan Yujin brushed at the grass stems in his hair, looking unhappy.

“What terrible luck!”

Xiao Jingrui said thoughtfully, “It’s good luck that it was you who fell, if it was Brother Su, he definitely wouldn’t have caught hold of anything, and would have fallen straight to the bottom....”

Yan Yujin gritted his teeth and looked at his ungrateful wretch of a best friend, and said angrily, “What do you mean it was good luck that it was me who fell?

You heartless....”

Mei Changsu had also come over to help him brush off the dirt, and asked warmly, “Are you injured?”

“No, no, how could an expert like me be so easily injured?”

Yan Yujin laughed and waved his arm carelessly.

“That’s true,” Xie Bi nodded his agreement seriously.

“He’s very good at hanging off objects in mid-air, you could often find him dangling in the air back in those days in Shuren Court....”

Fei Liu had also appeared at some point, and was staring with wide eyes at Yan Yujin, who was looking quite pitiful indeed.

“It’s difficult to know what dangers there are in a desolate yard like this, we had better walk on the stone path on our way out,”

Xiao Jingrui warned, and then turned to look at Mei Changsu.

“Brother Su, you should walk in our footsteps.”

“You are being too careful,” Xie Bi said with a smile.

“However bad this place is, it still cannot be not full of wells.”

“One cannot be too careful.”

Mei Changsu smilingly spoke up for Xiao Jingrui.

“Although the wild grass is dense, if Yujin had been more careful, he might not have lost his footing.

The ground is uneven here and has been covered by grass, it would indeed be better to return by the main path.”

The words of seniors have their weight, and after his suggestion, everyone returned to the main path, and slowly continued on to the areas they had not yet seen, but no matter where they went, the manor was just as desolate.

The courtyard was not large, and they quickly arrived at the back door, which was closed firmly with a thick steel lock.

Aside from Fei Liu, no one wanted to walk back through the courtyard, so Xie Bi, who was in front, stretched out a hand to pull the door open, but as soon as he pulled, the entire door came loose.

“Good heavens, it’s deteriorated to such a state, I suppose only those brick buildings are still acceptable.”

Yan Yujin shook his head.

“There isn’t a single place that doesn’t need fixing....”

“The doors and windows of the buildings also need changing, even if they have not rotted, they are far too filthy.”

Xie Bi added, “Brother Su, how could someone like you live in such a crude manor?

I hear there’s a good place in the eastern part of the city....”

“Never mind,” Mei Changsu cut him off with a smile.

“The money has been paid, what more is there to say?

As Yujin said, our Jiangzuo Alliance isn’t wealthy enough to buy a few manors in the capital and have them sit empty.”

Xie Bi added hurriedly, “You would not need to pay for the manor in the eastern part of the city, His Highness said....”

“Xie Bi,”

Xiao Jingrui sounded a bit fed up.

“Brother Su will handle this himself, why are you saying so much?”

Xie Bi was getting angry too, and was about to retort when Mei Changsu slipped in between the two and said with a playful smile, “Even if this manor isn’t good, I have already bought it, and I must live in it no matter what, or my brothers in the alliance would scold me for spending money recklessly, and you don’t want to see me receive a scolding, do you?”

As he spoke, he pondered which ‘Highness’ Xie Bi had meant.

“I’m afraid it will be at least a month before this manor is fit to be lived in.”

Yan Yujin smiled.

“But Brother Su has said he is in no hurry, and Jingrui doesn’t want you to move out so soon either, look, we’ve only come out to see the place today and he already looks so unhappy.”

Xiao Jingrui bit his lip and did not counter Yan Yujin’s words, but thought for a long moment and then finally asked slowly, “Brother Su, are you really...moving out?”

“I think I will be staying in the capital for awhile, and if I continued to take advantage of your hospitality, I would not feel comfortable.”

Mei Changsu’s questioning glance was gentle, but he spoke with his normal courtesy.

“Snow Cottage is our guest cottage and doesn’t affect the main residence, what disturbance would it be?”

Xiao Jingrui said with melancholy.

Mei Changsu smiled faintly.

“I know the Marquis and the Grand Princess would not mind, but it is still not too convenient....”

Although his words were simple, they hid a deeper meaning.

No one present was stupid, and remembering that he would eventually become an important adviser of one of the palaces, they understood what he meant by the inconvenience, and silence fell over the group.

“Moving out is good too, and anyway it’s not far.

As for me, coming here to visit Brother Su is even more convenient than going over to the Xie residence.”

After a moment, Yan Yujin’s joyful laugh broke the solemn atmosphere.

“But although this place isn’t big, it is still a whole manor, how could you and Fei Liu live here alone?

You should find some servants and guards.”

“I’ve never liked being waited on, and Fei Liu has always taken care of himself.

But we do need some people to take care of the place, and that won’t be difficult to arrange.... As for guards, there’s Fei Liu for one, and for another, I have some friends staying in the capital at the moment, and can invite them here as guests.”

Xiao Jingrui remembered that Yan Yujin had mentioned that the four expert fighters who had escorted them to the capital had not left, and understood, and though he still felt a little upset, he was also greatly relieved.

“It would be good to have a few more people, but...”

Who knew what Yan Yujin was thinking, as he grinned mischievously.

“Such a forsaken place like this may be full of goblins and witches.

Brother Su, you and your friends must be careful in the future, if you ever see a beautiful woman knocking on your window in the middle of the night, you must stand firm, and avoid even opening the window for a closer look, in case your soul is stolen away.”

“Psh,” Xie Bi scoffed, “If you don’t even take a look, how would you know it’s a beautiful woman?”

“If an evil spirit can change its appearance, of course it would choose a pretty one, otherwise if it chose the looks of the Minister of Appointments, Minister Sun, then it might as well just keep its original appearance.”

The whole capital knew of the coarse features of the Minister of Appointments, Minister Sun, and the young masters Xiao and Xie thought of his appearance and couldn’t contain their laughter, though Xie Bi scolded through his smiles, “Judging people by their appearances, how cruel of you!

You think you’re so handsome, but what has Minister Sun done to you?”

Yan Yujin huffed and threw open his fan dashingly and gave it a wave, turning to face the wall with a pleased look on his face.

“Spirits and goblins, listen well, if you must change your shape, then take on my appearance, and I guarantee you will be praised for being handsome and elegant....”

His words would have been amusing any day, but especially at this moment when, although his face was handsome, his entire body was covered in soil, his hair a tangled mess of grass and roots, and his appearance so far from being handsome and elegant that it should rather have been described as a wind-blown chicken’s nest, his two friends couldn’t help bending over in hysterical laughter, and even Mei Changsu turned his face away, his shoulders shaking gently.

“How could this enthralling manner of yours be learned in such a

short time?”

Xie Bi had laughed until he choked, and now spoke through his coughs.

“You’d better ask Brother Su to clean up one of the cottages just for you, so you can come and stay a few days and let those gobins and spirits have a nice, long look....”

“I won’t keep talking to you,” Yan Yujin turned to Mei Changsu with a very serious expression.

“Those two have been bullying me since I was young, I’m used to it.”

“Yes,” Mei Changsu nodded solemnly.

“I also feel that they are bullying you.”

“Hurry up and go change your clothes,” Xiao Jingrui punched his friend in the arm, feeling his heart much lightened after this episode of laughter.

“It wasn’t easy acquiring the reputation of the capital’s fanciest embroidered pillow, so you’d better hang on to that title.”

“Obviously, I’m beautiful both inside and out, alright?

You envious man...”

Yan Yujin sighed dramatically and brushed at his soiled clothing, but he had only just begun when his hands suddenly froze.

“What is it?”

Mei Changsu immediately knew something was wrong, and asked hurriedly.

“It’s gone....”

“What’s gone?”

“My jade moon chain....”

“Ah?”

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi both knew how precious his jade moon chain was to Yan Yujin, and both stepped forward.

“Maybe you didn’t bring it out with you?”

“The jade moon chain was hung on this belt, and the belt was on my waist, so how could I not have brought it out with me?

I felt it here before I came to find you guys....”

As Yan Yujin spoke, his face grew pale.

Although Mei Changsu didn’t know what he was talking about, seeing the expressions of those present, he understood this was no ordinary object, and said quickly, “It must have fallen.

We can retrace the steps you’ve taken today, and probably can still find it.”

“Yes, that’s right,”

Xiao Jingrui added, patting his friend’s back comfortingly.

“Even if we don’t find it today, don’t worry, with careful searching, we can certainly find it again.”

Yan Yujin’s heart was full of worry, and he didn’t say any more, but turned and jumped over the door that had fallen to the ground, returning to the ruined courtyard and began turning over grass and rocks as he carefully retraced his steps.

After Mei Changsu had quietly inquired after the appearance of the jade moon chain from Xiao Jingrui, the three also bent over the path and began looking closely.

Fei Liu hung from a tree branch high up in the air, peering curiously down at this strange scene that he couldn’t make sense of.

The return journey through the desolate manor took almost two hours longer than their arrival, but despite carefully retracing their footsteps and leaving a mess in their wake, there was still no sign of the jade moon chain.

Finally, everyone straightened their aching backs, and their gazes fell as one onto a specific place.

The dried well covered by wild grass and rotting wood.

“It won’t be such a coincidence, would it?”

Xie Bi said uneasily, “It would be difficult to search inside the well, even if there’s no longer any water, there’s probably still a thick layer of mud....”

Xiao Jingrui’s brow creased and he gave his younger brother a shove, then turned and patted Yan Yujin’s shoulder with a smile, then said lightly, “What’s so difficult about an old dried well?

Let me go down, and I can definitely find it for you!”

“I can go down myself,” Yan Yujin understood his good intentions and returned a faint smile.

“My clothes are already dirty anyway, what’s the point of dragging you through the mud as well....”

“Psh,”

Xiao Jingrui half-jokingly gave him a punch.

“They’re just clothes.

It’s dark down there, and my night vision is better than yours, and anyway, isn’t the young master afraid of snakes?

In this kind of dark and wet place, there will be plenty of snakes....”

At these words, both his brother and his friend rolled their eyes, and he was a bit confused, when Mei Changsu said quietly from the side, “Jingrui, it’s winter, snakes hibernate in the winter....”

“Never mind,” Xie Bi gave his brother a look.

“I’ll go find some rope, no matter who goes down, he should be tied tightly.”

As he spoke, he turned to leave, but was stopped by Mei Changsu.

“Fei Liu has already gone to find some, he is rather quick....”

He had just finished his explanation when the youth’s shadow descended quickly, his hands clasping a coil of thick rope.

Xiao Jingrui grabbed it and wound one end around his own waist, and as Yan Yujin knew he was blind in the dark, he didn’t protest, but reached out to help him make sure the knots were tied tightly, and only said quietly, “Be careful.”

“Ng,” Xiao Jingrui promised, then turned to see Mei Changsu picking dried grass from the ground, and asked curiously, “Brother Su, what are you doing?”

“Making a small torch from dried grass and wood, so you can bring it down with you.”

“No need, I can see very well in the dark, they all say I’m like an owl.”

Mei Changsu gave a startled laugh, then shook his head.

“It’s not to give you light, this well doesn’t look shallow, and the mouth has been covered by wild grass, so the air flow must be poor, and the air down below is probably foul and turbid, if the torch goes out down there, then you cannot stay long, or it will be easy to suffocate.”

The masters Yan and Xie were badly frightened, and hurriedly bent down to help pick wild grass, and the torch was quickly prepared.

Mei Changsu took out a small flint stone from Fei Liu’s person and lit the torch, then handed it to Xiao Jingrui, who was slowly lowered into the mouth of the well.

Xie Bi and Yan Yujin held onto the rope tightly, letting it slowly down, while Mei Changsu knelt by the mouth of the well, following the descent of the bright light.

Since the jade moon chain was an ornament hung from the waist,

it was naturally quite small, and although Xiao Jingrui had gone down for quite some time, he only kept calling for them to let him down further, as if he had not found anything yet.

“Stop, I’ve reached the bottom, the mud is really quite thick.”

A while later, Xiao Jingrui’s voice drifted up from the bottom of the well, echoing against the mossy walls and coming out slightly distorted.

“It’s difficult to search down here, it might take me awhile, and the torch is just about used up so if you see it go out, don’t worry....”

“But...” Yan Yujin bit his lip, worried, and was about to continue when an arm fell across his shoulder, and he turned to see Mei Changsu’s smiling eyes.

“Don’t worry, the torch has been burning steadily all along, it should be fine.”

Looking into that knowing gaze, Yan Yujin couldn’t help lowering his eyes, saying quietly, “Jingrui...has always loved being clean....”

“It is only the mud of the well, and will easily wash off,” Mei Changsu smiled.

“He doesn’t mind, what are you minding for?

Is the jade moon chain very important to you?”

“Ng,” Yan Yujin nodded.

“It’s an heirloom handed down in my family, my grandfather gave it to me before he died....”

“So,” Mei Changsu was still smiling faintly, “Finding something important to his friend is also very important to Jingrui.”

Yan Yujin looked at him for a moment and suddenly smiled, then crawled to the edge of the well and called down in a loud voice, “Jingrui – since you have this rare chance to do a favour for me,

you better look hard down there – ”

“Damn you!”

The cheerful curse drifted up from below.

“Just wait ’til I get out and shower you in mud!”

Mei Changsu couldn’t restrain his smile, and Xie Bi also shook his head with a grin, and the mood lightened considerably.

After a long while, there still seemed to be no sign of success.

“Jingrui, if you can’t find it, just come back up, there’s no need to stay down there....” Yan Yujin called.

“A bit longer....”

Xiao Jingrui’s voice echoed up, but the sound had not yet faded when suddenly shook, and a surprised “Oh!” sounded from below.

“What is it?”

Yan Yujin was terrified, and leaned half his body into the well, shouting loudly, “Jingrui! Jingrui!”

A reply came from somewhere down the well: “I’m alright....”

“Then what did you do that for, you scared me to death!”

Yan Yujin couldn’t help scolding, and turned to say to Xie Bi, “Let’s pull him up!”

“Wait,” Xiao Jingrui hurriedly stopped them, “There are still some places I missed, I’ll be done soon....”

Mei Changsu quietly added, “Don’t worry, if there’s anything wrong, Jingrui would tell us.

Since he’s gone down, he might as well have a careful look.”

Yan Yujin’s brow furrowed as he sat down again by the mouth of the well, and a few moments passed before he heard the voice call again, “Pull me up!”

Coming up was naturally much easier than going down, and in

the blink of an eye, Xiao Jingrui's head emerged, his body predictably covered in mud, and both arms covered in soil as well.

Yan Yujin silently grasped one of his hands and brushed roughly at the dirt with the inner side of his robes.

It was Xie Bi who finally asked, "Did you find it?"

Xiao Jingrui raised his other blackened hand, which had been tightened into a fist, and slowly opened it to reveal a hard, moon-shaped object covered in mud.

"Oh, it really did fall in there."

Xie Bi pulled out a handkerchief from his sleeve and wiped the jade moon chain clean, then returned it to Yan Yujin, who glanced at it before slipping it into his pocket.

"I'm glad you found it, and now you two smelly monsters can go back for a bath!"

Xie Bi let out a sigh and slapped them both on the back.

"Brother,"

Xiao Jingrui turned his head, his gaze serious.

"We will go back and bathe, but I must trouble you to make a run to the Capital Magistrate Office."

"The Capital Magistrate Office?"

What for?"

Xie Bi didn't understand.

"To report a case.

I saw down in the mud of the well...there were human skeletons...."

"What?"

Everyone was shocked.

Yan Yujin said in a hush, "When you cried out just then, was that

when you found the bones?”

“Ng.”

“Then why didn’t you come up right away?!”

“I saw just then a glint of green in the grass on the other side.

The jade moon chain is so small, if I came out then and let others go in to remove the remains, it would be covered and lost, so I wanted to find it first, and luckily, I did.”

“Stupid!”

Yan Yujin scolded through gritted teeth.

“It must smell so bad, hurry and go bathe.”

“Human remains in a dried well...”

Xie Bi’s face had slowly become pale.

“Even hearing the words is terrifying.

You really have some guts, to stay down there for so long...if it were me, I’d have climbed out right away....”

“Can you compare to Jingrui?

After all, he’s half a jianghu man!”

Yan Yujin had quickly found a new object of attack.

“Yes, and I’m only a useless man of the court!”

Xie Bi replied self-mockingly, then shrugged.

“Let’s go, Brother Su.”

Xiao Jingrui looked at him strangely.

“Where are you taking Brother Su?”

“To report the case to the Magistrate Office!”

“Can’t you go by yourself?”

Xie Bi raised an eyebrow.

“Big brother, this manor has been bought by Brother Su, it would be best if he reported the case in person, no?”

“Xie Bi is right,” Mei Changsu’s gaze drifted over to the well hidden amongst the wild grass.

“I should really go myself.”

Xiao Jingrui thought about it and saw the logic, and anyway he was extremely uncomfortable in his current dirty and smelly attire, and didn’t say anymore.

The five split into two groups, and each went their own way after leaving the manor.

Chapter 38: Qin Banruo

Perhaps because the backgrounds of those who reporting the findings were not simple, this ‘corpses in the well’ case which had been accidentally discovered by these gentlemen immediately raised even greater waves than usual both inside and outside the capital.

In addition, when the Magistrate Office members rushed to the scene for a closer examination, they discovered no fewer than ten sets of human skeletons, all completely decomposed, and which all seemed to be female, based on preliminary investigations.

When these shocking details were made known, the entire city was stunned.

Capital Magistrate Gao Sheng was ordered by his superiors to take over the case and given a strict deadline, and he was soon up to his earlobes in the investigation.

As the current owner of the manor, Mei Changsu was summoned for questioning more than once, but as he really did not know anything, repeated questioning did not produce any new directions of research, and anyway Gao Sheng did not dare to inconvenience him too much on account of his recent fame, and so turned the focus of his investigation onto the business owner who had acted as middleman instead, and at the same time sent people to carefully seek out the purpose and owner of the manor before it had disintegrated to this degree.

Around seven to eight days later, the results of the investigation were back:

the manor had changed hands twice this year, and was originally owned by a man called Zhang Jin, of unknown background, who had once owned numerous houses of entertainment in the capital, and who was low-key, but nonetheless powerful in his wealth and relations.

He had died of sickness four years ago, and his businesses too gradually died off, and so this manor had been released for sale.

Gao Sheng immediately sent people to the Zhang family to detain everyone associated with this matter for further questioning.

At this time, a man named Shi Douguan suddenly came forward to the Magistrate Office and claimed to have been one of Zhang Jin's trusted aides before his death, saying that he had received death threats regarding this case and begging for protection from the court.

Gao Sheng was delighted, and planned to stay up all night questioning him, but he had only just begun when a servant appeared to say that a message had arrived from the Crown Prince.

Gao Sheng curiously changed his attire and came to the main hall, where a young eunuch was waiting, and after he had bowed, the eunuch said crisply, "An order from the Crown Prince: I have heard about the case of the 'corpses in the well' in our royal city, and in such a matter as this, it is not possible for me, as the head of the government, not to inquire further, and therefore I hereby summon Capital Magistrate Gao Sheng to enter the Eastern Palace tomorrow to discuss this matter in person.

End order."

"Your servant Gao Sheng receives the Crown Prince's order."

Gao Sheng hurriedly bowed.

After the eunuch messenger had left, Gao Sheng turned the matter over in his mind uneasily.

To have been made an official in Jinling, a city overflowing with princes and nobility, Gao Sheng naturally had an astute mind and his own smooth set of skills.

The Crown Prince suddenly intervening in the case was unlikely to be solely due to his responsibilities of governance, and there were perhaps some hidden details that he had not yet perceived.

After some thought, Gao Sheng ordered for Shi Douguan to be brought from the interrogation room and took him into his personal room in his own house, and in the subsequent interrogation, purposefully dismissed all his subordinates and servants from the room.

As Gao Sheng was questioning Shi Douguan late into the night, a lantern also burned in the study of Prince Yu's residence far into the early hours.

“This Shi Douguan really has a list of names on his person?”

Prince Yu Xiao Jinghuan paced back and forth.

“Are we certain of this piece of news?”

“Your servant can guarantee it.”

A middle-aged person dressed in gray stood before him, and said with assurance, “That manor is called the Lan Manor, and is in name the private residence of Zhang Jin, but in reality, was the secret venue for his business.

Some officials of the court didn't dare to openly enter certain houses of entertainment, and so relied on Zhang Jin's private arrangements.

No matter what request the customer had, he was able to fulfill it.

With time, it was not unusual for some of those who enjoyed themselves too much to make a miscalculation, and accidentally kill the girls they had taken for amusement, and the corpses found are part of that group.

Five years ago, when Zhang Jin died, those kinds of exchanges were halted, it was just that no one could imagine that he had disposed of those corpses so carelessly, or that he had actually recorded the events in writing.”

A dim light grew in Prince Yu's gaze .

“So, the names on this list....”

“They are all people of renown and repute, and some are even important members of the court....”

“Our side?”

“I think there are people from both sides, but...”

The person in gray gave a hidden smile.

“His Highness the Crown Prince and his people have much more reason to worry....”

“Why?”

“When your servant found Shi Douguan, he wouldn’t hand over the list, but to gain my trust, he told me a few of the names of those guests who had taken the lives of those girls, and one of them is Lou Zhijing.”

Prince Yu’s eyes shone, and he let out a great laugh.

“Lou Zhijing is really on there?”

Haha, the Crown Prince must be panicking.”

“Lou Zhijing knows what he has done, and your servant believes he will tell the Crown Prince everything and beg for protection, Your Highness, why did you not take Shi Douguan into your residence, but let him go to the Magistrate Office?”

What if the Crown Prince....”

“Don’t worry,” Prince Yu said coldly.

“The Crown Prince still has not yet managed to control the capital.

Gao Sheng may not look like much, but he is no ordinary official, and no matter how the Crown Prince pressures him, he will still be able to withstand for two to three days at least.”

“Your Highness’ meaning is....”

“Our intervention must not be too obvious, or my father Emperor will become suspicious.”

Prince Yu gazed at the light before the window, his eyebrow raised, and motioned for the person in gray to draw close, whispered a few names in his ear, then said, “I must trouble you further tonight to go in my place to speak to these people in secret, and ask them frankly whether they have had interactions with Zhang Jin in the past, and whether they have killed anyone, and if they are honest, I will naturally find a way to keep them safe, but if they lie, then they will deserve their punishment when they are found out.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“As long as these few are not on the list, I don’t care about anyone else being found out, if we are not willing to sacrifice a few of our people, how could we catch the great wolf?”

The person in gray was accustomed to his careless abandonment of his pieces, and did not comment, only answering, “Yes, Your Highness” before withdrawing.

Prince Yu paced a few more times around the room, deep in thought, appearing uneasy.

After a long while, he was heard saying to the lamp on his desk, “Mei Changsu bought the Lan Manor and uncovered this case, perhaps this is no coincidence?

Since he has done this, is he trying to show that he is leaning towards me?”

He was alone in the room, and he appeared at first to be speaking to himself, but not long after he had spoken, the thick velvet curtain on the eastern side of the room trembled gently, and the soft, clear voice of a woman said quietly, “Not necessarily.

Perhaps he is only settling a personal grievance, and the matter has nothing to do with Your Highness.”

Following the words of this beautiful voice, a graceful, elegant figure appeared.

From her appearance only, her looks could not perhaps topple kingdoms and countries, but paired with her dainty air, she could indeed stir the hearts of any who looked upon her.

Prince Yu turned to her, and although his expression still looked slightly uneasy, he quickly recovered his composure.

“Banruo, have you discovered anything?”

Qin Banruo pursed her thin, red lips, paused, and said, “Is His Highness aware that Lou Zhijing once served as the governor of Yi province?”

“This I know.” Prince Yu’s mind turned quickly.

“Yi province is within the area controlled by Jiangzuo Alliance, have they had conflicts in the past?”

“Lou Zhijing is a rare talent, and therefore has become a trusted confidante of the Crown Prince, but his uncontrollable lust is not something that can be easily changed.

I have found out that when he was in Yi province, he forcibly took a pair of twin sisters into his residence, but their older cousin was a lowly member of the Jiangzuo Alliance, and he begged his lord to personally ask Lou Zhijing to return his younger sisters.

Lou Zhijing consented, and then returned to his residence and first violently raped the sisters before releasing them from his manor.

The two young ladies committed suicide in shame, but Lou Zhijing denied his crime, and the Jiangzuo Alliance could not find any proof, and so could only watch him evade the law, and thus were born the seeds of this case.

But these events were never made public, and few know about them...”

Prince Yu waited a long while, then saw that the young woman had no intention of continuing, and asked in surprise, “There’s only this bit of enmity?”

“Your Highness feels it is not enough?”

“Of course not,” Prince Yu couldn’t believe it.

“Lou Zhijing is the Minister of Revenue and the Crown Prince’s trusted adviser, and Mei Changsu would make an enemy of him just for the sake of the sisters of one lowly member of his alliance?”

Qin Banruo was silent for a moment, then said, “Does Your Highness truly want to recruit Mei Changsu?”

“Why do you even need to ask, of course I do.”

“Then Your Highness should better understand how Mei Changsu works.”

“You mean....”

“To Your Highness, those two sisters may not mean much, but to Mei Changsu, it was a great insult and offense.

Jiangzuo Alliance was able to quickly become the greatest sect in the world not only because of their skills in the Jianghu world nor because their loyalty and chivalry has captured the hearts of commoners, but most importantly, because they have carefully honed their power and authority over the years.

If Jiangzuo Alliance had not appeared to personally request this favour, then they would likely not have cared even if Lou Zhijing had behaved even more cruelly.

But it was precisely because Lou Zhijing looked down on this jianghu sect and paid them lip service before enacting this grotesque drama that he committed the great taboo against Jiangzuo Alliance, and so naturally his actions were regarded as provocation.”

Prince Yu was listening closely.

“So that means, Mei Changsu was only enacting a personal revenge, and wasn’t trying to favour me at all?”

“I do not dare comment on this.

The actions of this person recently are a mystery, and I have not yet been able to interpret them clearly.”

Qin Banruo sighed lightly.

“The first time Your Highness expressed a desire to recruit him was in the seventh month, correct?”

“Yes.”

“The Crown Prince’s invitation could not have been much earlier than that of Your Highness.

From the information I have gathered, when he received the invitation from the capital, Mei Changsu was a jianghu man through and through, and I cannot find any evidence of any interactions or relationships with any persons from the court.

But afterwards, Mei Changsu on the one hand declined the offers of the Crown Prince and Your Highness, and on the other hand left the heart of the Jiangzuo Alliance and finally moved into the capital, what is he trying to do?”

“He probably knows that talents that gain the attention of the Crown Prince and myself only have two roads to choose from.

As the chief of the Jiangzuo Alliance, this top-ranked gentleman of the Langya lists has led a contented life, why would he want to choose a dead end?”

“But the road he is walking now, does Your Highness think it is a way to survive?”

Prince Yu was startled, and stayed silent.

“Right now, is the Duke of Qing the heaviest stone in Your

Highness' heart?"

Xiao Jinghuan's eyebrows furrowed.

'Banruo, why do you ask what you already know?"

"Most of those in the military have remained neutral, and the few military officials that are truly loyal to Your Highness are the Duke of Qing's people.

If he falls, then there will remain in your hand only quills, and no swords...."

"This I know," Prince Yu sounded impatient.

"You don't need to say anymore."

"From Mei Changsu's actions so far, he is very familiar with the power balance in the court, and it is impossible for him not to know how important the Duke of Qing is to Your Highness.

Even if Xie Bi was right and they only came across the accusers on the road by accident, if Mei Changsu had the slightest inclination to favour your Highness, he should not have gone out of his way to make sure those two arrived safely in the capital."

Following her steady words, sweat broke out over Prince Yu's forehead, but he only silently clenched his fist, and did not say a word.

Qin Banruo lightly wiped away the sweat beading over his hairline, and a sigh escaped again from her cherry red lips.

"When he made that choice, he offended Your Highness and seemed to favour the Crown Prince.

And so at that time, I confidently told Your Highness that it was very likely that, on entering the capital, Mei Changsu would choose the Crown Prince...."

"But..."

Prince Yu spat out the word, but could not continue.

“But his actions now have truly exceeded my expectations.”

Banruo lowered her head and arranged the tassels on her sleeve, a white jade bracelet glistening on her wrist, its snowy brightness as mesmerizing as her skin, but out of the beautiful woman’s mouth came only the cold analysis of strategies.

“If he has slightly offended Your Highness over the matter of the Duke of Qing, then over the matter of Princess Nihuang, he has greatly offended the Crown Prince....”

Prince Yu’s eyes widened.

“What, Banruo, you think that Mei Changsu engineered the matter of the Princess?”

“Does Your Highness truly believe it was coincidence that you came across him on the street walking by himself that day?”

Prince Yu took a step back, sat down on a round chair, and beat his fist hard against his leg twice, his face full of uncertainty.

“That is only your deduction.

The events of that day involved too many people – Prince Jing, Jingning, the Grand Empress Dowager, the Empress, Meng Zhi, and me... who among this list could be so easily manipulated by Mei Changsu?”

“Then Your Highness’ conclusion is....”

“Perhaps some things were coincidence,” Prince Yu looked to be deep in thought, speaking slowly.

“Perhaps he did not arrange anything, and only came across the news, or perhaps he was not attacking the Crown Prince at all, but only wanted to save Nihuang....”

What could not be denied was that, although Prince Yu had underestimated Mei Changsu’s control over the situation, his guesses regarding what had truly happened that day were not far from the truth.

Qin Banruo thought for a moment, and agreeing that it was unlikely that Mei Changsu had been able to single-handedly control the matter of the Princess, nodded her head.

“But now I realize that I have been careless.”

Prince Yu smiled coldly.

“Contact Duan Jin tomorrow, I have some news the Crown Prince should hear, and make sure she acts as naturally as possible.”

Banruo only stared for a moment before understanding.

Prince Yu only knew that Mei Changsu had been involved in the matter of the Princess because the Empress had deceived Jingning, and found out from her that it was Mei Changsu who had asked her to bring the Grand Empress Dowager to Zhiluo palace.

None of the others involved had even mentioned this Mister Su.

Now, although the Crown Prince and Noble Consort Yu hated Prince Yu, hated the Empress, hated Prince Jing, and even hated Princess Nihuang, it would never occur to them to hate Mei Changsu, because they didn't even know that Mei Changsu had been involved in the outcome of the event.

And therefore, there was great advantage to letting them know what Mei Changsu had done.

Prince Yu took one look at Banruo's expression and knew she had understood his meaning, and said smiling, “It's said that Bi Gan has a seven-chambered heart, but I see that Banruo has more than seven.”

Qin Banruo smiled sweetly and looked neither humble nor proud, her beautiful figure shining under the light like jade, and Prince Yu felt his heart stir, but when he reached for her hand, she stepped aside lightly.

“You are still unwilling?”

Xiao Jinghuan said with a small frown.

Qin Banruo said indifferently, “Although Banruo has experienced much, I once swore to my shifu that I would not wed in this life, pray Your Highness forgive me.”

Although Prince Yu had fallen for her long ago, he still had some principles and was not willing to force any lady, and also deeply enjoyed Qin Banruo’s wisdom and insight, which helped him collect and analyze much of his information, and so he only controlled his impulse and let out a deep sigh.

Prince Yu’s consort was of high birth, her fathers and brothers were all officials in the court, she had long ago bore children, and she was heavily favoured by the Empress, so even if he himself was captivated by Qin Banruo’s beauty, he had given up the idea of abandoning his wife for her sake, and besides, there was a long future ahead of them, and there was no point to rushing anything now, so he poured a cup of fresh tea for her and said with a smile, “I have been rude.”

Qin Banruo understood everything he had been thinking, and so smiled and continued the previous conversation.

“The reason Banruo cannot understand Mei Changsu is because his actions follow no logic.

In the matter of the Duke of Qing, he chose to offend Your Highness, but in the matter of the Princess, he chose to offend the Crown Prince, and now with this Lan Manor, the case that has been uncovered implicates both sides.

Isn’t it because Your Highness was worried that the name lists would include someone important to us that you sent the Gray Hawk to investigate tonight?”

Prince Yu’s brow furrowed, and he absently raised the cup he had poured for Banruo and drained it, saying dazedly, “Could it be... that he is actually...”

“What?”

Qin Banruo raised an eyebrow.

“He is testing me and the Crown Prince?”

Qin Banruo’s heart shuddered, and she sank into deep thought.

“And perhaps also to showcase his own abilities....”

As Prince Yu thought, he became more and more certain, and hit the table with his hand.

“The thoughts and actions of these great talents are always a bit strange, especially when coming across narrow, petty-minded masters.

It is not strange that he would first want to test us.

And if the Crown Prince, even knowing that Mei Changsu had destroyed his plans for Princess Nihuang, still persists in his respectful attitude towards Mei Changsu, or even gives up Lou Zhijing as a demonstration of his magnanimity, then I fear even if Mei Changsu’s heart is hardened, he would not fail to be moved....

And if Mei Changsu decides to work for the Crown Prince, he will certainly act quickly, to make up for the wrongs he has done to him so far and to gain his absolute trust, and then, we will naturally bear the brunt of his attack.”

As he spoke, Prince Yu felt more and more uneasy, and finally stood up in a frenzy.

“This person’s strategies are truly unlike any other, I definitely cannot let the Crown Prince seize him first.”

Qin Banruo sat down slowly and said pensively, “Then if Your Highness can take Mei Changsu as your subordinate before the Crown Prince can act, are you willing to trust him unconditionally?”

Prince Yu had only been thinking of how to acquire this chief of the Jiangzuo Alliance, and had not put much thought into what to

do with him after the fact, and was silent for a moment.

“What would be the benefit in such a talent as this if we do not dare to use him once we have him?”

Qin Banruo was exceedingly clever, and after these words, she did not dig deeper but turned away to look at the moon, leaving Prince Yu to his thoughts.

A long while later, the lantern on the desk sputtered, and the smell of burnt oil drifted out.

Qin Banruo stood, removed the lantern cover and delicately trimmed the candle, watching Prince Yu out of the corner of her eye.

“If I cannot even tame one Mei Changsu...then what use would it be to talk about grand plans for ruling the kingdom?”

Prince Yu seemed not to see her gaze, but his voice rose now.

“Banruo, you must watch the Crown Prince’s movements for me, I...must have this Mei Changsu.”

Chapter 39: Spiral Market Street

After the wings of night had descended over the city, most streets could be described by these two words: 'dark' and 'quiet';

but there are always some places in the world where the situation is the opposite.

In the western part of Jinling, a winding section of the red-light district known as Spiral Market Street stood surrounded on both sides by tall pavilions and splendid buildings, and stayed silent and still in the daytime, but once night fell, the street was lit with wine and song and dance.

The meandering road wound through the city, and the grace and charm of this gentle paradise mesmerized all who entered, causing them to linger and forget about returning home.

The entertainment houses of Spiral Market Street each had their own style and attraction, such as the popular music of Miaoyin House, the latest dances from Willow House, the beautiful women of Crimson Sleeve House, the talented artisans of Orchid House....

each had their own unique strength, and although they had their conflicts, they had nonetheless been established for some time and had their own unwritten rules of conduct, and thus, as neighbours, they managed to get along well enough, and sometimes even pitched in to help each other out.

Like tonight....

"Mother Zhu, it's not that I want to cause you to lose face by refusing to help,"

Third Aunt Shen of Miaoyin House pleaded, her face full of remorse.

"You and I have known each other for so long, and Willow House and Miaoyin House are like family.

You may ask any other lady for help and I will certainly not refuse you, but Miss Gong Yu is not seeing any guests today....”

“Sister Shen, I have no use for any other lady, I need Miss Gong Yu to save us!”

Mother Zhu’s face was pale, she was close to tears, and if she were not being held up, she would have long since fallen to her knees.

“What?”

What bothersome guests are these, that even Mother Zhu cannot handle them?”

Mother Zhu was about to speak when a young servant boy came running over, crying anxiously before he had even come to a stop, “Mother, mother, it’s terrible, Young Master He is wrecking the place!”

Third Aunt Shen raised an eyebrow, and reached out to support Mother Zhu, who had gone limp, asking, “Young Master He, son of Minister He, the Minister of Appointments?”

“Yes, it’s that brat!”

Mother Zhu stamped her foot.

“He came in drunk tonight, and insisted on seeing our Xinliu, but Xinliu was keeping company with Master Qiu, son of the Earl of Wen.

But he refused to take no for an answer, and refused to see any of our other ladies, and started raising a fuss.”

Third Aunt Shen’s face grew serious.

“It’s not his first day out, how can he not know the rules of these places?”

“Isn’t it because he’s used to relying on his power?”

The Earl of Wen may be a nobleman, but he has no place in the

court, whereas Minister He has all the power of the Ministry of Appointments, a real position, and so this young master is used to being waited on hand and foot, and got impatient after a couple of hours.”

Third Aunt Shen sighed.

“Such is the way of the world.

Hadn’t you better try to convince Master Qiu to let him have his way?”

Mother Zhu let out an “Ai”, and said, “Master Qiu has loved Xinliu for a long time, how could he be willing to let go now?

He came first, and as he refuses to leave, I can’t force him to leave against the rules, not to mention our girl Xinliu also can’t stand Young Master He....”

“What about Xinyang?”

“She’s sick, she can’t even get out of bed....”

Third Aunt Shen frowned, deep in thought.

“Sister Shen, I’m begging you.

If Miss Gong Yu is willing to just show her face, Young Master He would certainly be delighted, and our business tonight will be saved, and I will do anything for you in the future, I will be forever in your debt....”

“Alright, alright, you don’t need to say things like this.”

Third Aunt Shen gripped Mother Zhu’s arm tightly as she was about to kneel.

“It is not up to me, which of these popular ladies do not have their pride?

I don’t dare give you an answer, I must first ask Yu’er.”

“Sister, take me to her, I will ask Miss Gong Yu myself.”

“Oh...alright...follow me.”

Third Aunt Shen took Mother Zhu by the arm, and the two had just turned around when they both halted in surprise.

A lady dressed in a yellow dress and a splendid green outer garment stood before the fence, and said with a small smile, "I have heard everything.

I was just about to pay a visit to Sister Xinyang to see how she's doing, and since Aunt is experiencing some trouble, it is no problem for me to help out."

Third Aunt Shen went over to her and said quietly, "Can you handle it?"

Gong Yu laughed coldly.

"Isn't it just He Wenxin?

I have my ways."

She was the leading lady of Miaoyin House, and even her own mother could not control her, and so now, hearing her words, Third Aunt Shen didn't say anymore, but only ordered Old Man Turtle to arrange for a sedan and saw them out herself, watching as servant girls followed after to wait on them.

When they arrived at Willow House, the place was a mess.

Fortunately, the rooms reserved for noble guests were situated at the back and divided into many small courtyards, and so, aside from the disturbance to the neighbouring rooms, the people of Willow House had managed to control the situation.

The glamorously-robed youth at the center of the frenzy was the notorious He Wenxin.

Although he was not ugly, his arrogant, aggressive nature made it difficult for anyone to like him, and Gong Yu only gave him a glance before a fierce expression crept over her face.

"Miss..."

Mother Zhu was nearly in a panic, and cried out softly.

Gong Yu's eyes skipped over the comical scene, and then, with a small smile playing on her lips, she slowly stepped into the courtyard, and Mother Zhu immediately gestured for everyone who had been fighting He Wenxin to step aside.

The young master who had been frenziedly smashing things left and right suddenly felt the opening, and in one motion, grabbed a flowerpot nearby and flung it in Gong Yu's direction.

Amidst the startled cries of the spectators, Gong Yu twisted and she quickly slid to her left, neatly dodging the flowerpot, all the while crying out weakly and falling to the ground.

“Miss Gong Yu!”

Mother Zhu was so frightened she felt as if half her soul had departed, and ran over to help her, asking desperately, “Where are you hurt?”

As soon as He Wenxin heard Gong Yu's name, a light came over his eyes, and he stared for a moment at the beautiful, charming lady of his dreams, whom he had yearned for but only seen a few times.

A smile spread across his face and he hurried forward to lend a hand, saying, “How did Miss Gong Yu come here? You must be scared, it's all the fault of these stupid servants....”

Gong Yu was shivering, but she pushed away He Wenxin's hands and said lowly, “I came to the wrong place....”

“No, no,” He Wenxin replied quickly, then asked, “Where is my lady going?”

“Oh, I have no business tonight, and was just going to visit Sister Xinliu....”

Mother Zhu hurriedly cut in, “That girl Xinliu is receiving a guest, could Miss wait a bit?”

“Oh, in that case, I will return to Miaoyin House and come

another day.”

“Aiya,” He Wenxin saw that although the heavens had not sent him a pastry, it had dropped a beautiful woman before him, and he was much appeased, and said coaxingly, “Since my lady has nothing planned tonight, I will keep you company, instead of letting you return to spend the night alone...come in, come in quickly....”

He was making his eager invitation when he suddenly remembered that this courtyard had just been rendered to egg yolk pulp by himself, and was not a suitable place to host his beautiful guest, so he quickly glared at Mother Zhu and said, “Hurry and prepare your best courtyard for me!

I am going to accompany Miss Gong Yu to drink and admire the moonlight.”

Mother Zhu looked up at the cloud-filled sky, what moon was there to admire?

But of course these words could not be spoken aloud, and since his temper had been controlled, the important thing was to prepare the place quickly, and so she said with a smile, “The Spring Bridge Cottage is still empty, and is the most comfortable and the most elegant of all the cottages, would the young master and lady care to go there?”

“Hurry, hurry and take us there.”

He Wenxin impatiently grasped Gong Yu by the arm.

“Miss Gong Yu, shall we go?”

Gong Yu lowered her head, and once again brushed aside He Wenxin’s hand, beckoned one of her serving girls over, and silently walked on ahead.

Although the Young Master He was not bright by nature, he understood that this leading lady of Miaoyin House had always been like this, and so suppressed his emotions and followed her out

of the courtyard.

The Spring Bridge Cottage was located a little to the east of Willow House, and to arrive there, one had to first cross a lake and wind through a peach orchid.

But with such beautiful company, He Wenxin did not notice the long journey, and was beaming the entire way.

Just as they had passed the lake and walked onto the clear stone path, Gong Yu suddenly halted, and said in a low voice, “Pray the young master go ahead, and Gong Yu will follow.”

He Wenxin stared blankly, and immediately asked, “Where are you going?”

“When I fell just now, my robes became dirty with mud, I want to go change.”

“No worries,” He Wenxin said.

“I admire beautiful ladies, not what they wear, you don’t need to go to the trouble of changing.”

Gong Yu’s eyelids fluttered, and she said gently, “Since I will be accompanying the young master for a drink, Gong Yu is not willing to harbour any imperfection in her appearance, pray the young master forgive me.”

In the face of these words from such a beautiful woman, He Wenxin had nothing to say, and so just smiled. “Alright, alright, alright, but I will not go ahead, I will wait here.

Once you change, we can go together.”

Gong Yu turned a gentle gaze on him and smiled without speaking, then turned quickly and disappeared into a small building to one side.

He Wenxin was attracted by her pretty air and dazedly took a few steps forward, wanting to take another look, when suddenly he felt something beneath his foot, and when he looked down, he saw the

bright reflection of a dropped object.

He bent down for a closer look, and realized it was a shining chain of pearls, which must have fallen from the beautiful head.

Stooping and picking up the pearl chain, He Wenxin's mind filled with images of the beautiful lady changing, and his heart lurched and he immediately tucked the pearls into his sleeve and strode towards the building Gong Yu had disappeared into, intending to feast his eyes with this excuse.

Mother Zhu, who had gone ahead, immediately saw his intent and was about to protest when she was unceremoniously shoved aside by one of the He family servants.

When he arrived at the small building lit with the glow of a small lamp, He Wenxin snuck to the window with a wicked smile, and was just about to peek inside when a voice drifted from within.

“Miss, is Miss Xinliu upstairs in this building with Master Qiu?”

“Yes...Master Qiu is a dashing young hero, and is such a good match for Sister Xinliu, I am truly happy for both of them....”

“How can Miss be happy?

Those two are enjoying themselves upstairs while Miss is lowering herself to spend time with that vile He person?”

Gong Yu gave a quiet sigh.

“Sisters must help each other out...but that He person is really far too vulgar, if he only had a tenth of the elegance of Master Qiu, I would not be so unhappy....”

Hearing words such as these, any person would find it difficult to withstand, and He Wenxin was not just anybody, and so fury rose in his heart as his courage grew with his anger, and hearing that the fellow, Master Qiu, was just upstairs, he immediately charged towards the stairs, ran up to the second floor and stopped in front of the door to the room, yelling, “You whose name is Qiu, get your

a** out here!”

He raised such a racket that everyone on the path outside could hear him, and Mother Zhu hurried over fearfully with some of her people as the He family servants ran up to the second floor.

Besides Xinliu and Master Qiu, there were two other guests on the second floor, and the first two unlucky persons who were kicked out by He Wenxin looked to be around forty, and even if He Wenxin had had even lower intelligence than he already did, he would realize that these weren't the people he was looking for, and he had just arrived at the third door when it suddenly opened, and a handsome youth in his twenties jumped out, shouting loudly, “Who's raising such a racket?”

He Wenxin's vision grew red and he charged forward with a punch.

But Master Qiu was also a noble son by birth, and was used to the pleasures of food and drink, not being bullied, and plus, he had drunk a little wine and the beautiful woman he loved was standing behind him, so he was not going to just stand there, but immediately threw a punch in return.

The two had not had much training in martial arts, and normally even if they were involved in fights, they rarely had to get involved personally, so now, their fighting had no skill or style, but resembled a street brawl, and was quite ugly to behold.

Mother Zhu, who had hurried over, was almost in tears of panic, and was about to shout for her people to pull them apart when the He family servants rushed over to help their master subdue his opponent.

Although Master Qiu also had servants, they had been invited elsewhere for drinks, and had not received the news, and Mother Zhu saw that the situation was deteriorating and hurriedly ordered the guards of Willow House to help.

The servants of the He family were accustomed to handling their captives roughly, and fell upon their victim and began beating him furiously, while He Wenxin was even more violent and grabbed a large flower vase and began lowering it with all his strength down onto Master Qiu's head.

“Master, dodge!”

A frantic cry rose from the room, and Master Qiu immediately twisted towards the left, but suddenly his right leg grew numb and he lost his balance, and, in a flash, his vision darkened, and he only felt a tremendous pain in his forehead before he toppled to the ground.

The white flower vase, which was half the height of a person, shattered brilliantly on his head, and the sound froze every person in the room, as everyone's eyes seemed to widen in slow motion, watching as fresh blow sprayed from Master Qiu's forehead, as his whole body shook for a few moments and then fell onto the glass shard-covered floor, and his head became showered in red.

At that moment, even the killer himself was shocked into stillness.

As the initial shock passed, a sharp cry sounded from the room, and everyone began to realize what had happened.

With a face pale as clay, Mother Zhu rushed to Master Qiu's side and grasped his wrist, then her whole body went limp, as if she were about to faint.

“He...it's his fault he didn't dodge...he didn't dodge...”

He Wenxin kept repeating, backing up a few steps to lean on the railing.

One of the more daring guests stepped forward and examined closely for a moment before lifting his head and saying in a shaking voice, “Dead...he's dead....”

At his words, Mother Zhu seemed to regain some of her

composure, and stood up, her hair a mess, and crying, “Help, help, call the authorities, hurry and call the authorities....”

Although He Wenxin was stunned because he had killed someone by his own hand, one of the guards among his servants hurriedly tried to take control of the situation.

“Wait, don’t...don’t report it...let’s talk, let’s first talk about this....”

Hearing this, He Wenxin seemed to wake up, and he hurried forward and grabbed Mother Zhu, saying, “I won’t let you report it, I’ll pay, I’ll pay!”

“What’s the bloody use in paying money now?”

Mother Zhu cried loudly.

“Master Qiu is also of noble birth, how could the old Earl of Wen let this slide?

My Willow House is ruined...ruined....”

“Young Master, hurry, let’s leave, let’s go home and have the old master think of a plan, hurry!”

The guard who had spoken up before pulled He Wenxin out the door, but they were blocked by the people of Willow House, and the situation descended into chaos once more.

In direct contrast to the frenzied mess was Gong Yu, who had appeared at some point in the hallway of the second floor.

She had changed into a light blue dress, and now slowly walked around the chaos, slipping unnoticed into the room in which everything had happened.

On the ground in the room sat a beautiful young lady, her face stunned and fearful, her eyes dripping with horrified tears, her body shaking so hard that the chattering of her teeth could be clearly heard.

She was obviously in shock over the bloody events that had taken

place before her eyes.

Gong Yu walked over to her and knelt, gently patting her back, and said, “Sister Xinliu, don’t be afraid, it’s alright...nothing will happen to you....”

Her voice was clear and sweet, and brought a strange comfort with it.

Xin Liu shakily lifted her head to meet her eyes, and then fell into her embrace, sobbing loudly.

As the chaos outside the room continued, Gong Yu lightly stroked the long hair of the person in her arms, and as her gaze swept across the bloody corpse by the door, a cold smile slid across her lips before her face became expressionless once more.

Chapter 40: He Jingzhong

Prince Yu's mood was very good these past few days, and ever since he had sent Gray Hawk to confirm that none of his most vital supporters were involved in the 'corpses in the well' case, he was preparing to calmly enjoy the show of the Crown Prince's panic.

The Minister of Revenue, Lou Zhijing, was young and vigorous, and managed to acquire vast sums for the Crown Prince through mysterious avenues every year, and was thus a highly valued 'gold mine' of the Crown Prince, so now, watching as this treasure chest was about to be destroyed, Prince Yu was so delighted that he often started from his sleep in joy, his cruel laughter ringing out too many times to count.

What he had not expected was that his laughter would soon turn to ashes, as the same trouble was about to descend upon his own head, and although the situation was not as serious, it was still enough to cause him great distress, so that he was no longer in any mood to laugh.

"Your Highness!

Your Highness!

I'm begging you...the three generations of my family...only have this one heir...."

The purple-robed minister kneeling in the receiving pavilion of Prince Yu's residence, tears flowing freely, was the Minister of Appointments, He Jingzhong, and his son He Wenxin had beaten to death Qiu Zhengping, the son of the Earl of Wen, and afterwards, although he had successfully escaped home under the protection of his servants, he couldn't hide forever, and the next day, the Capital Magistrate Office sent people over to arrest him.

He Jingzhong had relied on his status as a minister of the first rank to refuse them entry, but who would have guessed that this

little eighth-ranked constable from the government office would be such a character – he wasn't ruffled in the least by the refusal, but calmly stood before the gate of the residence with his warrant of arrest, reciting loudly, "By order of the law, I hereby arrest the criminal He Wenxin for the crime of murder at Willow House yesterday night, open your gates!"

He stood there repeating himself over and over, and when he grew tired, someone else took his place, and as the crowd before the gates of the residence grew and grew, for fear that soon half the capital would be gathered at his door – which was not only embarrassing but might also bring down imperial attention – He Jingzhong could only submit for now and hand his screaming, crying son over to the officials, fiercely commanding them not to harm his person, and then hurry over to Prince Yu's residence to plead for help.

The events had taken place at Spiral Market Street, which was where most of Qin Banruo's subordinates and spies were located, and naturally she was able to quickly gather the details of the case and report them quietly to Prince Yu.

As soon as he heard that the murder had taken place in front of numerous witnesses, and there was no shortage of evidence to be produced, Xiao Jinghuan also became distressed, and paced a few times around the room in silence, his brow furrowed and his face full of worry.

"Your Highness," He Jingzhong saw Prince Yu's expression and grew even more panicked, and wiped his tears before saying, "Your servant knows I have not taught my son well, and he has indeed brought disaster upon us this time...but pray Your Highness remember your servant's devotion and loyalty these many years, I am no longer young and only have this one son, who is the pride and joy of my elderly mother, and if anything happened to him, I fear she could not take it...Your Highness, Your Highness....."

Prince Yu glared at him coldly, wondering if he was worth the

trouble, but then, his own interactions with those ministers loyal to himself had always been based on favours and rewards, not to mention that since this He Jingzhong had been made Minister of Appointments, he had guarded his right to appoint and dismiss officials so closely that the Crown Prince had not found any way to intervene, and now seeing him weeping so miserably, it seemed that this worthless son of his was really his weak spot, and Prince Yu couldn't stand by and do nothing, so he softened his voice and said, "You have truly been too lax in your discipline.

In this capital city right under the foot of the Emperor, how can one act so rashly and violently?

If he had killed a commoner, so be it, but the victim is the son of an earl, and although he has no place in court at the moment, he still stands in the shadow of his ancestors' prestige, so the Earl of Wen has the right to take this to court.

Even if I tried to protect you then, leaving aside the matter of whether any officials would take my side, the Earl of Wen himself wouldn't let the matter rest, and if this came before the Emperor himself, no good would come of it for neither you nor me."

He Jingzhong beat his head on the ground and cried, "Your servant knows I am causing Your Highness great inconvenience, but if it were only a matter of killing a commoner, how would your servant dare to trouble Your Highness?

It is because the victim was a member of the Earl of Wen's household that your servant knows he has no power in this matter and came to beg Your Highness for help.

Highness, you know that the Earl of Wen has always been a coward and fears to make trouble, if Your Highness personally appeared to persuade him, I expect he would not dare to refuse...."

"You speak simple words, but is this a simple matter?

You love your son, does he not love his?

When a man has been incited to such fury, is there anything he will not dare to do?”

Prince Yu scolded, and then took a breath.

“You need to calm down, they will not sentence him to death the day after his crime, why are you panicking?”

“Your servant is afraid that once the Capital Magistrate Office passes the sentence, the situation will be difficult to recover....”

“The Capital Magistrate Office?”

Prince Yu laughed coldly.

“You think the Capital Magistrate Office wants to deal with your case?”

Gao Sheng must be having a terrible headache.”

Prince Yu was not wrong, and if Gao Sheng could hear him now, he would certainly cry out in agreement.

First there was the ‘corpses in the well’ case which had so greatly agitated the Crown Prince, and now there was this murder case which implicated one of Prince Yu’s beloved ministers, and if one were to look for the person in the capital with the greatest headache at this moment, it is likely one would have to look no further than this lowly third-ranked official of the Capital Magistrate Office, Gao Sheng.

He Jingzhong wiped his face with his sleeve and took a deep breath.

“Your servant was truly too panicked.

Perhaps Your Highness does not know, when the capital office sent their men over to make the arrest, they weren’t inclined to give even the slightest bit of face to me or to take any consideration of our feelings, and so I was worried....”

“This is where Gao Sheng is outstanding.”

Incredibly, Prince Yu was smiling in admiration.

“This case involves you on the one hand and the Earl of Wen on the other, and therefore may be raised to a higher authority at any moment, not to mention that the evidence is clear and obvious without any room for doubt, so he must be decisive and fast in his arrest, because if he delays and you send your son away, the responsibility falls to him, and then how could he answer to the Earl of Wen?

Now that he has arrested him, he can take his time and first assess carefully which way the wind is blowing, because if he sentences your son to death, then it doesn't matter how much he has offended you now, but if he absolves him of all crime, then he has done you a huge favour, and you would no longer care how he offended you when he came to arrest your son.

So, don't think that being a magistrate official in Jinling is any easier than your post of Minister of Appointments.”

He Jingzhong was well-versed in the art of politics, and it was only because he had been so shaken by his son's arrest that he had failed to make the connection, and now on Prince Yu's prompting, he immediately understood, and the anger that had arisen as a result of Gao Sheng's cold actions subsided, and he bowed and said, “Your Highness is truly wise beyond measure, your servant has been foolish.”

“Never mind, you don't need to try to appease me.

Your case is difficult, and at this moment, I cannot think of any solution.”

Prince Yu turned and saw that he was about to cry and beg again, and hurriedly waved a hand.

“Go pay a visit to Old Master Ji and come up with an idea, and then I will see whether it is feasible.”

He Jingzhong saw that Prince Yu's tone had softened, and joy

rose in his heart as he hurriedly bowed in thanks and then went quickly to the side courtyard, where he found the aforementioned Old Master Ji.

As a prince with the ability to compete with the Crown Prince, Xiao Jinghuan naturally had many sources of wisdom and strategy in his possession, and he had mentioned Old Master Ji because this particular gentleman had a background in criminal law and his specialty was dealing with legal matters, so perhaps he might be able to come up with a plan.

After hearing He Jingzhong explain the details of the situation, the two white brows of Old Master Ji furrowed into a woolly spherical shape, and combined with his wrinkled face, his appearance was decidedly comical, but He Jingzhong was in no mood to pay attention to anyone's appearance at the moment, and only gazed at him anxiously, and the tighter the woolly sphere became, the greater the fear in his heart grew.

After enough time had passed to brew a pot of tea, Old Master Ji let out a long sigh.

"This disaster that your son has wrought is truly no small matter...."

"This I know," He Jingzhong said impatiently.

"But even if I were to discipline him, it must wait until this matter has been resolved!"

Old Master Ji stroked his beard and said slowly, "My advice is to let the Capital Magistrate Office first pass their sentence...."

"What?"

He Jingzhong immediately leapt to his feet.

"Minister He, please be calm."

Old Master Ji reached out a hand.

"First listen to my explanation."

He Jingzhong calmed himself and said, “Please continue.”

“Firstly, although the Capital Magistrate Office is responsible for the law and order of our royal capital, it is still only a local office, and cannot afford to offend either you or the Earl of Wen.

It is true that Gao Sheng would not dare to find your son guilty, but to find him innocent, would Gao Sheng dare to single-handedly bear this responsibility?

If he delays in his management of this case because he is afraid to offend either side, then the person who will suffer is your son.

So, you must yield the first step and give Gao Sheng a way out of his dilemma – let him conclude the case, and do not pressure him to change his verdict, but let him find your son guilty of murder.”

“What?!”

“Minister, do not be afraid, a sentence passed by the Capital Magistrate Office is nothing to fear, what we must fear is a case with an ironclad conclusion.

Once you have yielded a step, Gao Sheng must naturally reciprocate, and although the case has been deemed a murder case, the evidence within the case can be muddled a bit, and the witness statements can be made inconsistent, and anyway the Earl of Wen will only know that the Capital Magistrate Office has judged this to be a murder, but not the details of the evidence itself, and so since Gao Sheng can gain your approval on the one hand, and will not offend the Earl of Wen on the other, he will certainly not refuse this.”

Old Master Ji gave a sly smile.

“Minister, think about it, once the Capital Magistrate Office has passed a sentence of murder, what will happen next?”

“The Ministry of Justice....”

“Correct.

He must report it to the Ministry of Justice.”

Old Master Ji knocked his fingers against his desk, speaking in utter contentment.

“This case cannot be concluded in the hands of the Capital Magistrate Office.

Firstly, he would not dare, and secondly, his status is too low and he could not bear the responsibility.

But the Ministry of Justice is different, their power is far greater, and most importantly, it is Prince Yu’s backyard, and

so would Minister Qi not work even harder than Gao Sheng in this matter?”

He Jingzhong suddenly understood, and struck his thigh with one hand while saying admiringly, “Old Master Ji is wise indeed!”

“Although this case involves people of importance, in the end, only one person died, and it is just an ordinary criminal case, and so no matter how hard Minister Qi works, he still has no reason to raise the case to the Ministry of Justice, and thus he can only wait for the Capital Magistrate Office to report it themselves.

If they report a case with an ironclad conclusion with evidence piling up like a mountain, then there would truly be no hope, but if the evidence and witness statements are found to have errors and inconsistencies, then the Ministry of Justice would have more than enough reason to re-open the case, and then our room for maneuvering will have grown drastically, and once your son has been transferred over, he will certainly suffer less as well, don’t you think so?”

He Jingzhong said with deep gratitude, “The old master’s plan is truly miraculous, I will go to His Highness and ask him to speak to Minister Qi.

But, as for Gao Sheng....”

“You do not need to worry.

Officer Gao has long since been completely absorbed by the ‘corpses in the well’ case, and he will definitely be eager to pass your bombshell to someone else.”

Old Master Ji smiled.

“His current master is my old friend, it will be no trouble for me to make a visit on your behalf....”

He Jingzhong hurriedly bowed.

“I have troubled the Old Master.

If all you say comes to pass, I will certainly repay you with rich gratitude.”

“We are all working for His Highness, there’s no need to be polite.”

After these words, Old Master Ji rose to see his guest out.

Because He Jingzhong was Prince Yu’s beloved confidante, he did not dare to delay, but sorted out a few matters and then ordered for a small litter to be prepared and departed for the Capital Government Office.

Chapter 41: Tea with an Old Friend

“This one!”

A large, oval pear drifted into view, looking plump and moist and very tasty.

“Why give me this one?”

Mei Changsu smiled at the youth.

“Biggest!”

“The biggest one is for Su gege?”

“Ng!”

Mei Changsu’s gaze skipped to the side and seeing Meng Zhi, who was sitting to one side, raise his cup to his lips, he smiled to himself and asked loudly, “Fei Liu, tell Su gege, what colour is this kind of pear?”

“Dark white!”

Meng Zhi spat out his mouthful of water with a “Phoo!” and stared at Fei Liu, coughing vigorously.

“Dark...dark what?”

Fei Liu gave a dismissive “Hmph!” and turned his head away, ignoring him.

“You know, our Fei Liu is very talented at inventing new words.”

Mei Changsu’s gaze was full of warmth as he gently ruffled Fei Liu’s hair, and Fei Liu, sensing his affection, leaned over and held out the pear again.

“Fei Liu, these can’t be eaten now,” Mei Changsu said, still smiling.

“These are frozen pears.”

“Frozen pears....”

“We freeze them so that they can keep longer, and when we want to eat them, we have to first let them sit for awhile and grow warm again, otherwise we won’t be able to bite into them.”

Fei Liu’s eyes widened, and he looked at the pear in his left hand, then at the one in his right, and finally raised the smaller one to his mouth, bit into it, and froze, stunned.

“Can’t bite into it, eh?”

Meng Zhi had recovered by this time, and came over, saying, “You have to soak them in water to warm them up, so that they grow soft enough to eat.”

Fei Liu processed these words for a few moments, and then suddenly disappeared.

“Actually, that pear isn’t the biggest I’ve seen.”

Meng Zhi shook his head.

“Isn’t the biggest sphere-shaped object in the capital at the moment the head of Capital Magistrate Gao Sheng?”

Mei Changsu couldn’t help laughing.

“Meng dage certainly has an amusing way with words.

Even if Officer Gao had not come across these troublesome matters, wouldn’t his head still be larger than a pear?”

Meng Zhi couldn’t hold back a laugh either.

“You’re one to talk, you bring two such difficult cases to him, yet you yourself are keeping idle.

Watching you tease Fei Liu, I know you are in a good mood today.”

The two were currently in an elegant little tea house in the southern part of the city, which was near the main streets, but not too noisy, and each tea room was its own single bamboo building, decorated tastefully.

Ever since the ‘corpses in the well’ case had been reported to the court, everyone in Jinling knew two things.

One, there were corpses in the well in Lan Manor, and two, the newly famous Su Zhe was looking for a residence.

Lan Manor was an abandoned wasteland, and now had become the scene of a vicious crime, and therefore was certainly no longer fit to live in, so Su Zhe needed to buy a new residence.

And so, no matter whether it was because they wanted to take the opportunity to make his acquaintance, or because they genuinely wanted to make a helpful recommendation, or because they simply had a residence for sale, the number of offers pouring in with possible manors for sale were too many to count.

But as he was still staying at the Xie residence, most of the inconvenience was shouldered by Xie Bi, and Mei Changsu had only so far visited the ones recommended by the Yunnan Mu family and Xia Dong, and so this was only his third such outing.

“What do you think about the residence I chose?”

Meng Zhi asked, leaning closer.

Mei Changsu glanced back at him.

“Is it possible that you are really planning to sell me this place?”

Meng Zhi grinned playfully.

“It does kind of seem like I’m rushing to build relations with a new celebrity, but you have really given me a lot of face, being willing to come out personally with me for a tour.”

“What kind of prestige does Commander Meng carry, that I would dare not to give you face?”

You saw how natural Xie Bi thought it was when I accepted your invitation today; if I had refused you, how shocked do you think he would have been?”

Mei Changsu smiled back.

“Not to mention, the bit of fame I have acquired in the capital, isn’t it all due to that fight between you and Fei Liu?”

Although it was not my arrangement, it was nonetheless an unexpected gain.”

“This child Fei Liu is truly a wonder, I haven’t seen him for a few days, and he seems to have improved already.

I hear he even defeated Xia Dong recently?”

“Ng,” Mei Changsu made a noise of agreement, as if he didn’t care much.

“He is a calm child, and so naturally picks up martial skills quickly and easily.

But he is still young, and his inner strength is not yet pure enough, and so when he comes up against such experts such as yourself, it would be difficult for him not to lose.”

“That’s no problem, he still has plenty of time to train.”

Meng Zhi picked up his tea cup, and asked a second time, “What do you think about the manor I picked?”

Mei Changsu thought for a moment.

“I can tell it was picked by you.”

“You shouldn’t be so mean, even though I don’t know much about estates and aesthetics, I know you, which is why I spent so much effort finding you this place, shouldn’t you be a little grateful?”

“That’s what I meant,” Mei Changsu looked at him kindly.

“Meng dage, you are really the one who understands what I want.”

Meng Zhi had originally been feeling quite satisfied with himself and proud of his work, but now, faced with such blunt words of gratitude, he was a bit embarrassed, and he scratched his head,

saying, "I do know the scenery of this manor isn't the best...."

"The scenery will have to be redone, otherwise people will wonder why I managed to pick this manor out of the hundreds and thousands I was given to choose from.

But its one advantage is better than ten manors with beautiful scenery.

Meng dage, you have truly outdone yourself."

"I really didn't put any special effort into it," Meng Zhi was still a bit embarrassed.

"I was only wandering around aimlessly when I discovered it myself, that the back wall of this manor is less than a hundred feet away from the back manor of Prince Jing's residence, with the intervening space being shaded ground surrounded by thick forest, and in addition, the main doors of these two manors open onto different streets, so the two residences seem to be in different areas of the city entirely, and it is really not easy to realize that they are actually located so close to each other.

Xiao Shu, don't you have people who are skilled at construction?

Once you've moved in, you can build a secret passage between the back courtyards of your and Prince Jing's manors, and then even if you do not meet in public, he can come through the hidden passage at night secretly for your private meetings...."

Mei Changsu looked helplessly at the first-ranked martial arts expert of Da Liang, and didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"That is indeed a good suggestion, but can you not pick up Fei Liu's manner of using words?

Private meetings?"

"Close enough..."

Meng Zhi thought for a moment, and then asked,

"So you don't intend to make your declaration public?"

After the matter with the Princess last time, the Crown Prince will realize sooner or later that it was you who destroyed him with one blow.

He is not a tolerant person, and will probably try to take revenge on you, so hadn't you better pretend to join Prince Yu's side for now, and at least benefit from his protection so you won't have to suffer both sides as your enemy?"

"Don't worry, they are both busy at the moment, and don't have time to deal with me."

A cold smile drifted across Mei Changsu's face.

"It is said that those who only defend will always lose. Since Prince Yu has used the 'corpses in the well' case to attack the Minister of Revenue, Lou Zhijing, the Crown Prince must naturally hold on equally tightly to He Wenxin's case.

I think...He Jingzhong will definitely find a way to raise his son's murder case to the Ministry of Justice for re-sentencing."

"The Ministry of Justice is Prince Yu's backyard, can the Crown Prince compete?"

"Prince Yu has the upper hand, it's true, but He Wenxin's case is much too black and white, and with the Earl of Wen's fury roused, it will be difficult for the Ministry of Justice to tamper with the case."

"You must be happy to see them turning on each other."

Meng Zhi saw Mei Changsu tucking his hands into his sleeve and hurriedly pushed the small brazier closer to him.

"But even if the Crown Prince manages to sentence He Wenxin to death, in the end, it is still not He Jingzhong himself who must die, and to Prince Yu, there is no great loss."

Mei Changsu smiled meaningfully and answered lightly, "If he knew how to restrain his subordinates from going too far, then He

Wenxin's case would not do him much harm....

His greatest weakness right now still falls on the head of the old Duke of Qing.”

Meng Zhi hit his fist against his thigh.

“That’s right, I wanted to ask you about this.

I thought, with Xia Dong’s return to the capital, she would have already gathered most of the evidence, so why has there been no word of the ‘land infringement’ case up until now, what is the Emperor thinking?”

“He is thinking...about who he should appoint to manage this ‘land infringement’ case....”

“Ah?”

Mei Changsu stretched out a hand and wrapped it around the brazier, his face calm, as if he was chatting about some idle matter.

“The Emperor has to deal with this ‘land infringement’ case because this custom of powerful court officials taking over whatever land they like has been getting out of hand, and is starting to affect national affairs.

But the question of who he should appoint to manage such an important case is a difficult one.

I think he has not decided on a suitable person, and that’s why there has been no mention of this case so far.”

As the commander of the imperial guard, Meng Zhi was naturally not unintelligent, and after thinking it over, he nodded, and said, “That’s right, Xuanjing officers only have the right to investigate, but cannot pass judgement, and this case is so important that it can only be handled by the Executive Secretary Bureau, the Imperial Censor Office, and the High Bureau of Justice...but....”

Mei Changsu laughed grimly.

“His Majesty the Emperor knows in his heart that the three heads

of these departments will judge the case, but without someone of neutral position and a strong will to oversee them, this 'land infringement' case will become a cat-fight, and his intention to use this case as an example and a warning against similar future incidents will be wasted."

Meng Zhi frowned and sighed.

"No wonder the Emperor is having trouble deciding, this is really a difficult situation."

Mei Changsu looked at him.

"So, it must fall to you to lift the Emperor's burden."

"Me?"

Meng Zhi was taken aback.

"What kind of solution could I come up with?"

"Of course there is a solution."

Mei Changsu wrapped his arms around the brazier, picked it up, and leaned back, the corner of his lip twitching.

"You can suggest someone to the Emperor."

"Who?"

"Prince Jing."

Meng Zhi stood up abruptly.

"What did you say?"

"No court official would be able to hold his own against those three heads, it must be someone of royal birth.

If the Crown Prince was picked, he would raise such a fuss that this case would never be closed, and if Prince Yu was chosen, he would let it fade into the background and dissolve into nothing.

Prince Jing has kept himself far from palace politics for many years, and has always been upright and outspoken, and only if he

handled the case would it be able to achieve the purpose the Emperor intends.”

“But wouldn’t Prince Jing offend many people by taking on the case?”

“If he wants to enter into the fray, how can he avoid offending people?”

The important consideration is whether it is worth it.”

Mei Changsu’s tone became light and cold.

“This case is perfect: first, he will gain the love of the common people; second, it will raise his power and prestige; and third, it will showcase his ability and competence.

Not to mention, if he offends some people, he will naturally gain the support of others.

If he keeps standing off to the side, no one will remember he exists....”

Meng Zhi watched him closely for a long time then finally let out a long sigh.

“Once you have made up your mind, you are never wrong.

Nothing in this world is certain, and I know you have already prepared every step.

But what if the Emperor doesn’t agree?”

“He will.”

“You are so sure?”

“He will, because he has no better option.”

Mei Changsu tightened his mouth and swallowed the sigh that had slid to the edges of his lips.

Aside from there being no other choice, there was actually another reason.

It was because the Emperor did not love Prince Jing very dearly, and so would not think or care about the difficulties Prince Jing would face in accepting this assignment, and thus, it would be easier for him to make up his mind.

And as for Prince Jing, this would be his first step onto the path of no return.

From this point on, there would be no turning back.

Chapter 42: Mister Shisan

Although there were many things he had left unspoken, Mei Changsu was still exhausted by his conversation with Meng Zhi, and now he leaned weakly over his table, intending to rest for awhile.

When Fei Liu came in and saw him lying there motionless, he was greatly alarmed and was about to rush over for a closer look when Meng Zhi, who didn't want him to wake Mei Changsu, reached out a hand to stop him, immediately raising the ire of the youth.

His palm came flying over and Meng Zhi had no choice but to block it, and as the two exchanged several blows as quick as lightning, although the disruption was not great, the frail and lightly slumbering Mei Changsu was nonetheless jolted awake, and so he sat up again slowly.

“Su gege!”

Fei Liu instantly forgot about Meng Zhi and leapt over to him, giving the commander of the imperial army a good scare.

Mei Changsu smiled at the youth and reached out a hand to accept the pear he had produced from his sleeve, then raised his gaze to Meng Zhi's blank stare, and couldn't help asking, “Meng dage, what's wrong?”

Meng Zhi looked closely at Fei Liu for a moment, then said, “Although I wasn't using my full strength and wouldn't have hurt him, the fact that he can disappear from the middle of a fight with such smooth grace, without leaving any weakness I could exploit and without any disruption to his breathing pattern, this is something really stunning.”

Mei Changsu gave him a wicked grin.

“Stunned, are you?”

Better watch out, or your rank as the first-ranked martial expert in Da Liang will sooner or later be taken by our Fei Liu.”

“It’s a bit early for that,”

Meng Zhi laughed loudly with a heroic air.

“I don’t dare underestimate this child, but neither will I fear him.

It is also a great help to me to know that such a caliber of martial arts still exists in the world.

But his fighting style looks strange and sinister, how can he have such a sunny internal disposition?”

“The method he initially trained was overly harmful to the body, and although he gained formidable power from being forced to learn it, it would have decreased his lifespan in the end.

That’s why he has switched to practicing this ‘splendid-sun’ style of martial arts, which can help to dissolve the insidious poison of the energy he learned before,”

Mei Changsu explained simply.

Although he had spoken casually, Meng Zhi knew that re-learning a whole new set of martial arts was no small matter and required destroying all the knowledge one had previously acquired, and understood that Fei Liu must have suffered a near fatal injury and fought his way back to life, and although he had not personally heard of the ‘splendid-sun’ style of martial arts, from the power of Fei Liu’s training, he could tell that it was a very high level technique, and wondered who had passed it on to Fei Liu.

Such a mysterious martial style must be related to some unusual secrets of the jianghu world, but although he had an exceptionally close relationship with Mei Changsu, Meng Zhi did not think for a moment of inquiring any further, only pondering thoughtfully over what he had seen of Fei Liu’s fighting style and inner energy.

“Eat!”

Although Fei Liu knew that the two were discussing himself, he showed not the slightest interest, and seeing that Su gege had only taken a bite of his pear and stopped, he shook his sleeve and urged him again.

Mei Changsu gave him a warm smile and lowered his head, slowly taking another bite.

Meng Zhi saw him enjoying the pear and grinned at Fei Liu, teasing, “Hey, I’m a guest, won’t you give me one too?”

Fei Liu hesitated for a moment.

He actually really did not like this big uncle whom he couldn’t seem to beat, but seeing the way Su gege treated him, he understood that this uncle was one of their own, and after thinking for a moment, he couldn’t see any way out, and so grumpily took out another pear from his sleeve and threw it over.

Meng Zhi sank his teeth into the pear and froze, but seeing Mei Changsu’s smiling gaze turn to him, he proceeded to take a big bite as if nothing had happened.

From one of the neighboring bamboo buildings, the lingering tune of a flute drifted over, sweet and crisp, seeming to cleanse the minds and souls of all who heard it.

Hearing the music, Fei Liu vanished out the window like a wingless bird, disappearing into the treetops once more.

“That child, he must have cooked the pears to warm them up.”

Meng Zhi held up the core of the pear he had almost finished eating, and shook his head with a sigh.

“The pears weren’t sweet to begin with, and after he cooked them, they’ve become as hard as blocks of wood.”

Mei Changsu didn’t seem to hear him, but leaned back against the bamboo chair, his eyelids drooping gently, as he quietly

listened to the clear tune carried over by the gentle breeze.

When the song died away, he let out a long sigh and said, "I have come to the capital to enter into the dragons' wars and the tigers' battles, to fight for a better kingdom.

Uncle Shisan's song is too sorrowful."

Meng Zhi raised an eyebrow as a thin, elderly gentleman dressed in green emerged from between two bamboo buildings, giving off an indistinct air as if he were standing far away in a bamboo forest.

He came to their building and did not enter, but drew aside his robes and knelt before the door, saying in a deep voice, "Shisan greets the young master.

I was thinking of the past and my heart filled with grief, and so unintentionally disturbed the young master's mood, please punish your wretched servant."

Mei Changsu looked at him, his gaze betraying a hint of nostalgia, and said in a low voice, "Uncle Shisan truly knows my heart.

You do not need to stand on ceremony here, please rise."

The old gentleman rose solemnly and entered.

He looked upon Mei Changsu's thin, frail figure, and seemed to tremble, moved beyond words.

Meng Zhi was an old member of the Chiyan Army and knew that Lin Shu's mother had been close friends with an imperial musician, and he had also lived in Jinling for many years and was therefore familiar with the name of the famous composer of Miaoyin House, Mister Shisan, but he had never before put these two persons together, and now, seeing the scene before his eyes, he understood, and was shaken.

Mei Changsu composed himself, and then raised a hand and gestured for Shisan to come closer, at the same time turning to

Meng Zhi and saying, “Meng dage, this Mister Shisan is an old member of our Lin household, so from now on, I must ask the great commander to take good care of him here in Jinling.”

Meng Zhi understood his meaning and nodded.

“Miaoyin House, right?”

I will make sure to take care of it.”

“I thank you in advance.”

Mei Changsu laughed lightly.

“Meng dage has been here for a long time, and what we must now discuss is not entirely within the confines of the law, so perhaps the commander should not stay?”

Meng Zhi made a dismissive noise.

“I want to listen to your secrets, what are you going to do?”

Mei Changsu slowly lowered his head and didn't speak for a long time, and then finally said, “When it is necessary, I will not hesitate to use your power, but no matter what, I still wish for you only to help me perform certain tasks that are without risk; after all, it was not easy for you to have ascended to the place you hold now....”

Meng Zhi looked at him steadily.

“Do you want to hear the truth?”

“Meng dage....”

“I really do value my current position and identity very much, and if you had not returned, I would say that these things could be considered important to me.”

Meng Zhi's gaze was firm and unyielding as iron.

“But, Xiao Shu, since you have come back now, there is no way that I can remain uninvolved.”

Mei Changsu briefly closed his eyes, and when he opened them

again, his expression was once again calm as water, and he did not look at Meng Zhi, but turned to Mister Shisan.

“Uncle Shisan, the matters I have asked you to look into, have you investigated them?”

“Yes,” Mister Shisan answered respectfully.

“Qin Banruo of Crimson Sleeve House was apprentice to a princess of the Hua tribe, whose nation was exterminated thirty years ago, and she is now one of Prince Yu’s most trusted advisers.

I have discovered that fifteen concubines of various court officials are also her subordinates, and as for the list of names...her spy network is deep, but Gong Yu has succeeded in infiltrating her network with some of our people, so as soon as the young master gives the command, I am confident that we will be able to destroy her power.”

Meng Zhi raised an eyebrow.

“Controlling the court officials through their concubines?

Prince Yu has even more tricks up his sleeve than the Crown Prince.”

“Do you think the Crown Prince has any fewer?”

Mei Changsu threw him a glance, and turned away again.

“Do not touch Qin Banruo for now, there are some things that I cannot tell Prince Yu myself, so I must trouble her to pass on the messages.

I have two pieces of news here, go back and discuss with Gong Yu how you can allow Qin Banruo to discover them.”

“Young master, please continue.”

“First, everyone believes that the persons behind the attempted murder of Xuanjing Officer Xia Dong on her return journey to the capital were under the Duke of Qing’s orders, but it is not so.

The assassins were actually employed by Tianquan Manor, and were under the direct orders of the manor's chief, Zhuo Dingfeng.

Second, the elderly couple who came to the capital to make the initial accusation are aged and frail, but they were still able to avoid assassins sent by a wealthy household, and managed to flee across four provinces to Jiangzuo territory; this was not because they had good fortune and met some righteous protector, but because there were people secretly guarding them."

Mei Changsu stopped for a moment, the corner of his mouth tightening.

"And the people who were protecting them from the shadows to ensure that they arrived safely into the capital to make their accusation, were also hired by Tianquan Manor."

"What?"

Meng Zhi, listening off to the side, had broken out in a cold sweat, and although he knew he should not interrupt, he couldn't help himself.

"How could that be?"

"With only these two seemingly unrelated pieces of information, it is easy to become confused."

Mei Changsu smiled.

"Let me explain it to you.

When I mentioned Tianquan Manor, who among the court did you immediately think of?"

"Of course the Marquis of Ning, Xie Yu.

Since the two families came to share a son, their relationship has become incredibly close."

"Zhuo Dingfeng is a jianghu man, and he must have intervened in this matter at the request of Xie Yu.

Think about it, Xie Yu used the Zhuo family to escort a pair of accusers into the capital to make a case against the Duke of Qing, don't you feel this is very strange?"

Meng Zhi was deep in thought.

"It is indeed...although Xie Yu has always maintained a neutral front, his heir, Xie Bi, has openly sided with Prince Yu, so why would the Xie family escort people into the capital to accuse the Duke of Qing, who is one of Prince Yu's important supporters?

Unless...."

Meng Zhi gasped, suddenly understanding.

"Unless Xie Yu is actually supporting the Crown Prince!"

Mei Changsu gave a small smile.

"The land infringement case of Bin province is not difficult, even someone mediocre would have been able to easily investigate the matter.

But the Emperor had to send Xia Dong.

And so in the end, she not only found out everything about the land infringement case, she even unexpectedly discovered that those who had secretly escorted the elderly couple to the capital were actually sent by Zhuo Dingfeng.

Like you, she naturally immediately thought of the Xie family, and also immediately realized that Xie Yu was actually the Crown Prince's right-hand man.

But Xie Yu still very much wants to keep a foot in both boats to preserve his advantage, and so he cannot let Prince Yu discover the role he played in the land infringement case, thus, he could only burn his bridges and try to silence Xia Dong before she entered the city."

Meng Zhi's eyebrows furrowed, and he sighed, "Actually, he didn't need to go so far...."

“Correct, he actually did not need to go so far.”

Mei Changsu’s gaze was serious.

“Because, Xuanjing officers never involve themselves in court politics, and so even if Xia Dong knew, she would not say anything....

but Xie Yu was blinded by his own involvement and didn’t realize it at the time....”

“So Xia Dong now knows that Xie Yu was the one who tried to kill her?”

“She knows....”

“You found some way to tell her, huh?”

Meng Zhi laughed.

“Even without my hint, she would have discovered it herself.”

“How strange, Xia Dong has returned to the capital long ago, and since she knows that Xie Yu tried to silence her, why hasn’t she said anything?

This isn’t like her, she’s usually so fierce and quick to react against any insults.”

Mei Changsu sighed lightly and said, “I had hoped that she would speak out, but after I thought about it carefully, I understand why she has not said anything....”

“You know why?”

“That year, when Nie Feng died in battle, the one who brought his bones back to the capital to return them to Xia Dong was Xie Yu...and for this favour, Xia Dong will forgive him once....”

A dull pain arose in Meng Zhi’s chest.

Although he knew of the tragic end of those events of the past, he had never been clear on the actual details, and had never dared to ask, and now, seeing Mei Changsu bring up Nie Feng, although his

voice was steady and his expression calm, for some reason, Meng Zhi felt as if he was seeing through him into a glimpse of the fiery hell within, but the burning image passed by in a flash, and he didn't dare look again.

“Since Xia Dong will not say it, then I will.”

Mei Changsu continued quietly, as if he had not felt anything unusual.

“Xie Yu has had a comfortable time living off of both sides, it is a pity that those days are about to end.

Since he has chosen the Crown Prince, then I will let Prince Yu know that among the enemies he must face, he must not overlook this ‘pillar of the court’...”

Meng Zhi nodded heavily.

“This Xie Yu's schemes are truly profound.

But, Xiao Shu, will Prince Yu understand simply from these two pieces of news?”

“Don't worry,” Mei Changsu smiled.

“Mistress Qin is exceedingly clever, and is especially skilled at drawing accurate conclusions from minimal amounts of information, so these two pieces of news will be enough for her.

It is too bad she has chosen Prince Yu to fulfill her own ambitions, or she would truly be a valuable talent.”

“Well, no matter how smart she is, hasn't she still fallen into your trap?”

Mei Changsu shook his head.

“She is working in the open, and I am in the shadows, so even if I have the upper hand for now, I do not dare underestimate her.”

He turned to Mister Shisan, who had been listening quietly, and said, “You must be careful when leaking the information, and

consider carefully how much to release and when to do so, Qin Banruo is incredibly smart, you must not act carelessly.”

“Yes,” Mister Shisan bent his head.

“I will certainly not let you down.”

“Good.”

Mei Changsu rose, looking tired.

“If anything happens, you may contact me by the usual methods.

Uncle Shisan, you may take your leave.”

Mister Shisan bowed and retreated a few steps, then thought of something and stopped, drew out a lotus flower embroidered pouch and presented it with both hands, saying, “The young master must not be sleeping well since entering the capital, this den of tigers and wolves, this is a sleep fragrance that Gong Yu spent many months blending, and knowing that I would be seeing the young master today, she asked me to bring it over, pray the young master indulge her efforts and burn a piece before you sleep, to bring you good dreams.”

Mei Changsu stood there quietly for a moment, some unknown emotion passing over his pale face, but after some time, he slowly stretched out a hand and accepted the lotus pouch, slipping it into his sleeve without a second glance, and said indifferently, “Alright, please thank Gong Yu for me.”

Mister Shisan bowed again and left the bamboo house, quickly disappearing among the bamboo forest once again.

Chapter 43: Luring the Tiger Away from the Mountain

When they departed the Bamboo Tea House, Meng Zhi and Mei Changsu both left the way they had come, one in a green-cloth palanquin, and one riding a fiesty, tan horse, followed by a few imperial guards and two servants sent by Xie Bi.

The entourage avoided the busy main streets, choosing to return by a quieter side street.

When they left the small alley and arrived at a crossroad, one of the mounted soldiers of the imperial guard rode over to convey a message that the Emperor had summoned the commander into the palace.

Meng Zhi hesitated a moment, but Mei Changsu had already drawn aside the curtain of his little palanquin to say, "I am much indebted to the commander's great kindness, and now since there is this summons from His Majesty, I dare not disturb you any further, but will bid you farewell here, and come to thank you in person another day."

"Mister Su is too modest."

Meng Zhi saluted, turned and ordered his imperial guards to carefully escort Su Zhe back to the Xie residence, then bid his farewells and rode away towards the palace.

He had ridden a good distance when Meng Zhi suddenly remembered that the set of uniform he kept in the duty room had lost the jade pendant on its belt, and though it wasn't very obvious, this was a royal summons to see the Emperor and appearances were very important, so he slowed his horse, preparing to order the guard who had passed along the message to go to the commander's residence to bring him a new belt, but when he turned around, he discovered that the messenger was nowhere in

sight, and suddenly, a great suspicion rose in his heart.

He took in everyone riding beside him at a glance, and they were all indeed his own people, but the messenger had bowed low to the ground when delivering his message and only spoken a few words, and so he had not look at him very closely, and now that he thought about it, it was very likely that it had been someone else masquerading as an imperial messenger.

If this summons to the court was false, it would be discovered as soon as he entered the palace gate, which meant that the objective of the enemy was not any harm aimed at himself, but was merely to lure him away from the main target.

At this point, Meng Zhi's heart sank, and he hurriedly turned his horse and raced back along the road he had just ridden, whipping and urging his horse faster as he shouted with his inner strength for those in his path to move aside, cursing the fact that he had not been born with wings and hoping that Mei Changsu had not come to any harm.

When he arrived at the crossroad where they had parted, it had long since become deserted, and as there were two different paths leading away to the Xie residence, Meng Zhi halted and turned his horse in several circles, unable to decide which way he should take, and he was just standing there at a loss when, suddenly, muffled shouts drifted from a distance, picked up by his keen hearing.

After quickly pinpointing their location and distance, Meng Zhi sprang off his saddle onto the flat roofs of the nearby buildings, and with a few nimble steps, his figure flew through the air like an arrow leaving its bow, and a few moments later, he had arrived at the chaotic scene, and as he glanced around, his heart filled with fear and fury.

Mei Changsu's little palanquin lay on its side on the road, the roof of the palanquin shattered into powder on the pavement, and the porter and attendants lay around it, whether unconscious or

dead it was hard to tell, and even the few guards he had personally left behind were no exception.

In the center of the street, Fei Liu was exchanging furious blows with a person dressed in yellow, their fighting strokes so ferocious that the guards standing around had no chance to join the fight.

Meng Zhi had no time to look any closer and quickly scanned the road all around him, but found no trace of Mei Changsu, and in a frenzy of worry, he leapt down with a shout, sending out his fiery 'Waterfall of Light' and preparing to join Fei Liu in bring down the enemy.

But who could have expected that, although this move made the enemy hurriedly retreat away, Fei Liu was extremely unhappy and immediately turned and raised his wrist to block it.

“It’s me!”

Meng Zhi knew that if he started fighting with Fei Liu now, it would give the enemy the perfect opportunity to escape, but Fei Liu was simple in nature and often made errors in judgement, so he didn’t waste any time with words but quickly flipped over to the other side to block the yellow-robed person’s escape route.

Fei Liu saw him go and didn’t pursue, but turned again and sent another wave of attacks against the person in yellow.

He had switched targets twice in the blink of an eye, but the whole process had been natural and smooth, his breathing showing no sign of disturbance, and the yellow-robed person couldn’t help letting out a sound of surprise.

Meng Zhi had already shifted his position, and was about to enter into the fight again when he suddenly heard a faint call off to one side, “Meng dage....”

When he turned to look, it was Mei Changsu, standing under the eaves of a building on the adjoining street, beckoning him over, and when he looked a little closer, he realized it was a spot which

had been obscured by another building from the view of the rooftop he had been standing on before, which was why he had not immediately noticed Mei Changsu there.

He bounded over and grabbed Mei Changsu's wrist for a quick inspection, then looked him up and down, and seeing that, though his face was pale as white jade, he didn't seem to have suffered any new injuries, he finally let out a sigh of relief.

"Fei Liu is in no danger at the moment, don't get involved for now,"

Mei Changsu said lowly, his gaze locked on the two figures flying around the street.

"I'm glad you're alright.

With Fei Liu's skills, I'm not worried...."

Meng Zhi broke off abruptly.

Just now, he had been too anxious, and when the person in yellow retreated so quickly after his appearance, he had not paid much attention to his fighting skill, but now, on closer examination, he was quickly growing alarmed.

With Fei Liu's talent, he could easily be counted among the top ten experts in the world, though where exactly on the list he should be placed it was hard to say, as Xuanjing Officer Xia Dong herself had lost to him, and even he himself, the so-called first-ranked martial arts expert in Da Liang, could not afford to be distracted or careless but had to put in all his energy and strength whenever he fought against the youth.

So who could have thought that this ordinary-looking person in yellow could actually hold his own against the full strength of Fei Liu's attacks?

Mei Changsu looked on silently for a few moments, then his brow furrowed as he made up his mind, and he exchanged a glance with Meng Zhi, confirming that they had reached the same

conclusion, before stepping forward and saying in a clear voice, "General Tuoba, you have come from afar to be our guest, it's alright to exchange a few moves, but now that Commander Meng Zhi is here, why not stop and let us find a place to talk?"

The person in yellow had been found out, and hearing that the person he had just exchanged blows with was Meng Zhi, he knew that even if he kept fighting and defeated this nameless young expert, it would do him no good, and so he could only step back and retreat from the fight.

Fei Liu, hearing Mei Changsu's voice, also did not continue attacking, but stood still, glaring at the yellow-robed person with his fierce, cold gaze.

Knowing that the person before him was the much revered third-ranked martial arts expert of the Lang Ya Lists, Meng Zhi purposefully walked out in front, putting Mei Changsu behind him, and cupped his hand in greeting, saying, "General Tuoba, the emissaries of your honorable nation have left our capital many days ago, how is it that the general has chosen this time to grace us with your presence?"

Tuoba Hao stood there silently, and because he was wearing a mask over his face, his expression could not be seen, but after a brief cold silence, he raised his fist to his chest and bowed.

"The embassy of my country returned in defeat from your noble nation, and Baili Qi, the brave warrior handpicked by our fourth prince, received a hard lesson at the hands of this Mister Su, and is still missing to this day, and I would have no face indeed if I did not come myself for a look around."

Hearing this, Mei Changsu said with a smile, "Could it be that the general has come this time to teach me a lesson on behalf of Warrior Baili?"

In that case, you have truly wronged me, at the time, I tried a hundred ways to decline, but I could not defy an imperial order,

and the officials of your honorable nation spoke up and aroused the situation, and so I could only reluctantly oblige with a few of my little tricks.

I must humbly beg the general's great forgiveness."

Tuoba Hao scoffed coldly.

"I tested Baili Qi's martial arts before he left.

So before I came, I also said that you had no real martial art skill, but had merely resorted to tricks to gain a victory, but after today's fight...."

He glanced over at Fei Liu.

"To have such an expert by your side as a nameless bodyguard, I think you must have some outstanding talent."

Mei Changsu smiled ruefully.

"Fei Liu is still young, how could he be a worthy opponent for General Tuoba?

And if I had any outstanding talent, I would not have so shamefully retreated in escape as the roof of my palanquin was shattered by the general...."

Hearing this, Meng Zhi's face darkened.

"General Tuoba came to our Da Liang without invitation and carelessly attacked a guest of our nation, what explanation do you have for this?"

Tuoba Hao choked for a moment, not knowing how to reply.

He had relied on his nigh-unbeatable martial artistry to enter secretly into the capital of Da Liang for a look at this Su Zhe who had beaten Baili Qi with a few children, and originally had truly not intended to hurt anyone, only wanting to get a measure of the man before leaving quietly, but who could have guessed that Su Zhe would have an expert like Fei Liu by his side, who had tangled him up in a fight before the first-ranked expert of Da Liang, Meng

Zhi himself, had also appeared, and so he had not only been unable to leave, his identity had been revealed as well, and so he had now come to this embarrassing situation which he was finding difficult to explain.

But although he was in the wrong, Tuoba Hao did not want to appear weak, not to mention that he was ranked third on the Langya List of Martial Arts Experts, and Meng Zhi was ranked second, but the two had never fought personally, and he had never understood how the master of Langya Hall had come up with such a ranking, so had always harboured some anger in his heart, and now that he had been caught, why not take the opportunity to have a match and avoid the awkward explanation?

He raised his sword to his chest, and declared coldly, “This is Commander Meng Zhi’s territory, what have I left to say?

Make your move!”

Mei Changsu wanted to stop him, but then changed his mind, turning and retreating to a distance to watch the fight.

Fei Liu followed by his side, and though he remained expressionless, there was a hint of excitement deep in his eyes.

The second-and third-ranked of the Langya List of Martial Arts Experts were currently exchanging blows in an alleyway in the capital of Da Liang – if this news had been spread, half of jianghu would have squeezed in for a look, and the only reason the other half would not have come was because they knew they wouldn’t have been able to get anywhere near the scene.

It was a pity that everything had happened too abruptly, and there was no time now to spread the news and sell tickets to the event, and so the only ones who had the great honour and privilege of witnessing the fight were Mei Changsu and Fei Liu, standing off to the side.

Long ago, a certain court minister in Northern Yan had grown

too powerful and decided to force the Murong imperial family to abdicate in his favour.

Lord Tuoba seized his opportunity to strike during the abdication ceremony and killed the scheming court minister.

His sword flashed cruel and lonely in the hall filled with soldiers, striking left and right and killing all those who stood in his path, until, with robes soaked in blood, he escorted the Murong family back to their rightful place on the throne.

From that day forward, the Tuoba clan was heralded as the greatest swordsmen in Northern Yan, and generation after generation had never failed to produce exceptional masters.

Compared to Tuoba Hao's legendary family history, Meng Zhi's reputation was much more down-to-earth.

Both his inner and outer strength had been trained in the Shaolin style of martial arts since he was young, and there was absolutely nothing mysterious about his martial artistry.

He had climbed the ranks to his current position by the strength of his hands and feet, nothing more.

Unlike the fight between Tuoba Han and Fei Liu just now, which had been built on speed and reflex, Meng Zhi's every move was steady and firm, and it seemed as if Tuoba Han's sword flashed in ten different strokes while he only slowly returned one of his own.

But though they fought at different speeds, their strokes met at the same point, and while Tuoba Hao's sword strokes flashed by like streaks of light, Meng Zhi's slow moves seemed to form a thick, impenetrable wall.

When the blaze of light met the thick wall, they produced the kind of dazzling shower of sparks that could only be found in fights between two masters of this caliber.

As one of the only first-hand witnesses of this historic fight, Mei Changsu didn't seem to be treasuring his opportunity, as his gaze

kept wandering off as if he was distracted, and now and then he would lower his head in deep thought.

He plainly was not watching seriously, until the blurred figures suddenly separated and the two each took a few steps back, watching each other carefully, and then he suddenly seemed to remember his responsibilities as an audience member, and hurriedly applauded and cheered.

On the surface, it seemed as if there was no clear victor and they would have to continue for a while longer.

But as Mei Changsu came forward, all the while smiling and saying, “Wonderful!”, Meng Zhi did not tell him to step back, but rather gathered up his energy, as if taking the opportunity to end the fight.

Tuoba Hao’s expression was hidden beneath his mask, but because the mask was thin, it was clear that he was grinding his teeth, and that his eyes had become red.

But finally, he regained his composure and released the sword in his grasp, scoffing coldly.

Chapter 44: The Northern Yan Master

“The famed swordsmanship of Tuoba is truly sharp as the winds of the desert, and powerful as the waves of the sea,”

Meng Zhi paid the compliment solemnly, but his tone grew cold again as he said, “But General Tuoba must still answer the question I raised before – why have you come here to the capital of our nation?”

Tuoba Hao’s cold gaze fell onto Mei Changsu, as he replied, “My country’s embassy came with the good intent of a marriage request, but now one of our strongest warriors has gone missing, when has your noble nation given us an explanation?”

“You mean that Baili Qi?” Although Meng Zhi knew the truth behind Baili Qi’s disappearance, his face betrayed no sign of it.

“He walks on his own two feet, how could we know where he has gone?”

If General Tuoba feels he has the right to demand an explanation from our country, why not come with the credentials of a diplomat and ask openly?”

“Hmph, you people of Da Liang have always been skilled orators, no good would come of such questions.

I only wanted to come to see what kind of person could make Baili Qi ashamed to return to his own country.”

The corner of Mei Changsu’s mouth curled as he said, “And has General Tuoba’s method of ‘seeing people’ always involved baseless accusations and cracking open the roofs of palanquins?”

Tuoba Hao said proudly, “I never regret the things I have done, and since I have offended Mister Su, say what you want me to do, but say it openly.”

“Of course we...”

Meng Zhi was about to say that of course they would first have to arrest him and go from there, but suddenly feeling Mei Changsu pinch his waist, he reacted quickly and continued, “Of course we should let Mister Su, whom you attacked, decide what to do....”

Hearing these strange words, Tuoba Hao couldn't help being surprised, and his gaze turned again to Mei Changsu.

Whether by rank or by age, the person with the right to make the decisions should have been Meng Zhi, could it be that this Su Zhe's position in Da Liang was so unusual that even the commander of the imperial guard would listen to him?

“The commander has given me another difficult task.”

Mei Changsu took in Tuoba Hao's expression at a glance and understood why he was surprised, and couldn't help smiling, but continued lightly, “General Tuoba's sword only fractured the roof of the palanquin and did not hurt anyone, and he did his best not to harm the servants and guards, choosing not to use any of his killing strokes, which shows that he had no intention to cause any real trouble.

But as for the matter of Baili Qi, I truly know nothing, and if he decided on his own to leave, how could the General have so easily found this out in so short a time?”

Tuoba Hao was not unintelligent, and immediately understood the meaning behind Mei Changsu's words.

He had come to find Su Zhe for the sake of Northern Yan's reputation, and not because he wanted to get to the bottom of Baili Qi's disappearance, and so he took his cue from him and replied, “Since Mister Su says he knows nothing, I have no reason not to believe him.

Please do not worry, I will immediately leave Jinling, and will be back in my country within ten days, and will not stop anywhere on my way.”

“Good!”

Meng Zhi said in a deep voice.

“I believe General Tuoba is a man of his word.

As such, we will part here, and meet again in the future!”

Although Mei Changsu had already expressed his intention to let him go, Tuoba Hao had not expected Meng Zhi to agree so readily, and his preparation to undergo an intense battle in order to leave was in vain, and he stood stunned for a moment.

But he knew that, since his identity had been exposed, he could not stay in Jinling a moment longer than necessary, so he quickly regained his composure, clasped his fist in farewell, and did not waste any more words, but turned and disappeared from view.

When he felt from the air that this Northern Yan master had really gone away, Meng Zhi bent to examine the wounded on the ground and discovered that they had only fainted, and had not come to any great harm, and then finally, he turned and pulled Mei Changsu to one side, asking quietly, “Why did you let him go?”

Mei Changsu gave him a look.

“Is the commander confident that you could have captured him alive?”

“Well...it would probably have come to a difficult fight...but as he said, this is my territory, and it is not a jianghu duel, so I would not have needed to go against him on my own.”

“And after you have captured him, what then?”

Mei Changsu spoke indifferently.

“Kill him, or imprison him indefinitely?”

Meng Zhi had not thought about how to handle the situation, and hesitated.

“He is one of the great generals of Northern Yan, a beloved

minister of the Yan Emperor, and whether you kill him or imprison him, neither the Yan Emperor nor the head of the Tuoba clan would sit by and do nothing.

And then, for the sake of one Tuoba Hao, if the two nations came to war and the border comes under threat, who will be sent to defend it?”

Mei Changsu sighed.

“It wouldn’t be the Crown Prince or Prince Yu, would it?”

“Oh,” Meng Zhi understood.

“That’s right, at that time, of course we cannot let Prince Jing be sent away to lead the troops....”

Mei Changsu turned his gaze towards the direction in which Tuoba Han had disappeared, a faint expression of annoyance drifting across his face, and his brows furrowed as he said coldly, “I have not met him in battle before, and do not know what his military tactics are like.

Someday, when such a chance arises, I will take the opportunity to try my hand against him.”

“Not bad,” Meng Zhi smiled.

“It would be immensely satisfying to meet such a person in battle.

When the time comes, don’t forget to let me lead your vanguard.”

Mei Changsu smiled back at him, the momentary fierceness disappearing as he resumed his customary calm, quiet air, and then he turned his head and asked, “Weren’t you summoned into the palace?

Why did you think to come back?”

“That messenger was an impostor, I found out on the road, and realized it was a plot to lure the tiger away from the mountain, and

so hurried back, and thankfully you hadn't come to any harm...."

"An impostor?"

Mei Changsu's long brows furrowed.

"Yes, his acting skills really weren't bad, even I mistook him for one of my men, and so he fooled me at first.

If I had not suddenly thought to ask him to do something for me, I would not have realized the trick until I arrived at the palace gates."

Mei Changsu took a few steps forward, and pressed the tips of his fingers together, seeming to be in deep thought.

A moment later, he turned back and said firmly, "Meng dage, you must enter the palace immediately and report your meeting with Tuoba Hao to the Emperor."

"Oh? Why? Haven't we already let him go?"

"It is precisely because we have let him go that you must go to court and report it, and also plead for forgiveness."

Mei Changsu's eyes were fathomless and dark.

"Because, if you do not report it, there will soon be someone arriving before the Emperor to accuse you of smuggling one of the high ministers of another nation in and out of the capital."

"How?"

Would Tuoba Hao be so careless as to be caught on his way out?"

Meng Zhi was astonished.

"And how would you know?"

"Meng dage, do you think that the person who masqueraded as an imperial messenger was sent by Tuoba Hao to lead you away from me?"

"Was he not?"

Meng Zhi thought about it carefully, and gradually understood.

If he knew that the Emperor had a habit of summoning people to court without warning, and knew who among the imperial guard was responsible for passing along imperial commands, and could copy that person's appearance and actions so well that he had fooled even Meng Zhi, then this person had an intimate knowledge of many different aspects of Jinling, and could not be an outsider like Tuoba Hao, who had only been in the capital for a few days.

It was already no simple task for Tuoba Hao to have found out that Su Zhe would be going out today and to hide in wait for him on the road he would take on his return journey.

Mei Changsu saw his expression and knew he had understood, and continued, "What I have concluded is this: someone was waiting to attack while I was out, but was afraid of the consequences if you stayed by my side, and so came up with a plan to lure you away.

But they did not expect Tuoba Hao to turn up so suddenly and disrupt their plans, and before they had a chance to react, you had discovered the trick and hurried back.

And so in the end, these people have not dared to show their faces.

But even if they have not drawn near, Tuoba Hao's swordsmanship is too frightening, and we cannot take the risk that they have not noticed everything that has happened.

So you must hurry ahead, and report these things to His Majesty."

"Ng," Meng Zhi rubbed the stubble of beard on his chin and nodded.

"His Majesty has no ill intent against the Northern Yan at the moment, and as you say, if Tuoba Hao had been publicly arrested, it would have been difficult for the court.

Forcing him to leave Jinling quickly actually causes the least amount of trouble, so His Majesty should not punish me for acting of my own accord.”

“This is only if you return immediately and report everything to him.

If it seems as if you released him in secret, then no matter what you say, the Emperor would be suspicious.”

Mei Changsu pushed at his shoulder.

“Stop lingering, go quickly.”

“But the people here....”

“It’s about time for them to wake, Fei Liu and I will wait here a bit and then return ourselves.”

“That’s no good, what if those lying in wait for you have left yet, what then?”

Mei Changsu looked at him, a little amused, and said quietly, “Commander, do you really think you are the only protection I have in Jinling?

Don’t worry, nothing will happen to me.”

Meng Zhi stared blankly for a moment, then laughed, embarrassed.

He had never been a person to make a great fuss, and so, after hearing Mei Changsu’s words, he didn’t delay any longer, but said, “see you later,” and flew away.

Mei Changsu took Fei Liu with him as he inspected the people lying on the ground, ordering the youth to press a few of their vital meridian points.

Tuoba Hao had not wanted to truly hurt anyone in Da Liang, and he had been careful with his attacks, and so soon, they had all regained consciousness.

It was not far to the Xie residence, and so Mei Changsu did not let them bear him again on the palanquin, but leaned on Fei Liu and walked by himself to the gate of the manor, where he turned and dismissed all of Meng Zhi's guards.

It had left in good shape but returned like this, and Xie Bi stared at the roof-less palanquin for a long while in a daze before thinking to ask Mei Changsu what had happened.

As for the people who had lured Meng Zhi away to strike against himself, Mei Changsu did not even need to investigate to know that they were connected with the Crown Prince.

After all, since he had arrived in Jinling, the only ones he had truly offended were the Crown Prince's people; since Prince Yu still dreamed of acquiring the qilin prodigy, it was unlikely that he would resort to murder at this point in time.

He supposed the Crown Prince had finally discovered his role in the Princess' rescue, and had given up any hope of recruiting him to the Eastern Palace, and so had succumbed to this 'if I can't have him then I'll destroy him' mentality.

And if this was the Crown Prince's brushstroke, then it must be related to Xie Yu, and perhaps the route the palanquin-bearers of the Xie residence had taken had also been planned in advance, or the false imperial messenger would not have so easily found Meng Zhi among the vast, numerous streets of Jinling.

But faced with Xie Bi's worried inquiries and seeing his reaction to his own simple explanation, the young man truly seemed to have no idea of the plot and trap behind the day's events.

And from his observations of Xie Bi so far, Mei Changsu could be almost certain, given Prince Yu's intelligence, the reason that Prince Yu had never once doubted Xie Bi's loyalty was because this heir of the Marquis of Ning truly believed that his father wanted him to support Prince Yu, and so his speech and his actions were all genuine.

In other words, Xie Bi didn't know that his father was using him to keep a foot in both boats in order to secure a good future no matter what the outcome.

Thinking of the depth of Xie Yu's cunning, that he would so callously use even the son he loved most, a chill grew in Mei Changsu's heart, and now, faced with Xie Bi's questions, he grew warm with sympathy.

"Is there really no hint we can pursue to find out who did these things?"

Xie Bi could not know the thoughts passing through Brother Su's mind, but was thinking very seriously.

"Not even a single person was caught?"

"When Commander Meng appeared, who dared to linger?"

Naturally, they were all scared away."

Mei Changsu smiled wearily.

"Let him investigate, I won't bother."

"But the attack was aimed at you," Xie Bi continued hurriedly, "How about I go tell His Highness Prince Yu, and ask him...."

"No need."

Mei Changsu's firm gaze fell onto Xie Bi, stopping him.

"A case like this with no lead, no good will come of investigating it, and we will not catch the true masterminds anyway.

I will be more careful in the future, that's all."

Xie Bi thought dazedly for a long moment, then blurted out, "Could it be...."

Mei Changsu cut him off, and said, closing his eyes, "Xie Bi, I'm a bit tired, and want to rest for awhile.

When Jingrui comes back and finds out about this, please help me tell him what happened, I don't want to repeat it all again."

Xie Bi looked at his pale skin and withered appearance, and knew that he was not lying about being tired, and so did not bother him any further, but said quietly, “Brother Su, rest well,” and slowly left Snow Cottage.

Book 3: Wind and Rain

Chapter 45: Killings in the Night

That day, Xiao Jingrui had gone out with his mother, Grand Princess Liyang, and it was late by the time he returned, but when he heard from Xie Bi what had happened to Mei Changsu, he still immediately hurried over to Snow Cottage.

But when he arrived at the door of the guest cottage, he discovered that it was all dark, and it seemed as if everyone inside had gone to sleep.

Before, he might not have cared and might have barged in and woken them anyway, but, for some reason, the closeness of their friendship seemed to be dissipating, and etiquette and courtesy seemed even more important now than in the first few days of their acquaintance.

He felt this especially strongly now, as he stood there gazing into the darkness of the courtyard and the shadows of the trees all around, and it was as if this friend who had gained so much of his admiration and respect was truly drifting further and further from him, and was no longer the warm, laughing Brother Su who had walked beside him at the beginning.

Giving a long sigh, Xiao Jingrui turned and followed the stone-paved path towards his own rooms.

In the cold, still night, there was a heavy dampness in the air; perhaps it would snow later in the night.

The first time they had met was in the snow on Qinling, where they had pledged friendship over wine and laughter, and now things had come to this, and he couldn't help the emotions welling up in his heart, as his footsteps grew slower and slower.

Just after he passed the rock garden, there was a sudden coldness on his face, and when he reached up, his fingers brushed against wetness.

He lifted his head and gazed intently into the dark sky and couldn't see anything, but his skin and nose had detected what his eyes could not, and he realized it had begun to snow lightly.

It was not yet midnight and the snow had already begun to fall, it seemed tomorrow would dawn on a world of crystal and glass.

If he had not been so burdened by the woes of the world, he could have met up with two or three friends and admired the snow by a warm brazier with the company of good wine, the joy of the day complemented by the beauty of the scenery.

It was a pity....

Letting out another sigh, Xiao Jingrui shook his head, as if shaking loose the weight on his chest, and reached out a hand to wipe away the wetness on his face.

As he was about to take another step, he thought he saw a dim shadow flit by out of the corner of his eye, so quickly it seemed half a hallucination, but when he turned his head to look, there was nothing there.

Whether it was from a sense of foreboding or simple vigilance, Xiao Jingrui held still, standing quietly behind the rock garden, watching Snow Cottage from between the peaks of two rocks.

Sure enough, a moment later, another dark shadow flew by.

This time, he had concentrated and so saw clearly.

The shadow had come from the direction of the eastern wall of Snow Cottage, and after leaping up the walls of the courtyard, it was now lying motionless on the roof of the cottage, and a moment later, a second shadow had appeared from the same place and disappeared onto the roof.

This pattern repeated itself until there were about ten people on the roof of Snow Cottage.

Xiao Jingrui was just wondering why Fei Liu was being so quiet

when a window on the west side of Snow Cottage suddenly trembled, and almost at the same moment, there was a muffled groan from the roof and then a figure was tumbling down into the courtyard, and he could see that a slender shadow, fighting like a demon, had joined the others on the roof, and the rest of the dark figures had been forced back onto the east side of the roof, and seemed to be having some difficulty defending themselves.

Xiao Jingrui was just smiling in admiration of Fei Liu's skill when, in the next instant, his smile froze on his face.

This was because another group of invaders had appeared in his field of vision, coming from the southern wall, and had neatly avoided Fei Liu, who was being distracted by the other group of fighters.

Without stopping to think, Xiao Jingrui was already flying through the air, shouting in a loud voice, "Who dares to charge into the Xie Residence?"

Because he had no weapons on his person, as he shouted, Xiao Jingrui chose one of the fighters closest to him and struck down with the meat of his palm.

His opponents seemed to be familiar with the situation in Snow Cottage and had not realized anyone besides Fei Liu was around, and so were surprised at first, but quickly regained their composure, and one of them made a gesture and two of the others came forward to engage Xiao Jingrui, as the rest charged towards the main building Mei Changsu usually stayed in.

Although this leader of the assassins had made a quick and firm decision, he committed two mistakes.

First, he underestimated Xiao Jingrui's martial arts.

The two black-clothed figures who had been ordered to stop Xiao Jingrui lost their swords by the third move, and by the fourth, they had both toppled to the ground, only having managed to

slightly slow down this noble son of a Marquis house.

Second, he underestimated Fei Liu's ferocity.

Because Mei Changsu had always restrained Fei Liu from hurting anyone, it had given observers the wrong impression that this youth only possessed rather impressive martial arts skills.

No one could have known that on this dark night, he would attack like the reaper himself, his every stroke aiming to kill, not leaving the slightest chance for survival, and the speed and cold efficiency with which he was taking care of those around him were frightening to behold.

But at the same time, Xiao Jingrui and Fei Liu had also committed a mistake – they had underestimated the abilities of the leader of the assassins.

After realizing his disadvantage, the leader immediately ordered the rest of his men to engage Fei Liu, as he himself turned to face Xiao Jingrui's rapidly descending sword.

Weapons are one thing, and swordsmanship is another.

Because it was a sword seized in battle, it was not the most natural fit, but Xiao Jingrui's skill with a sword was still second to none, and so, no matter how the leader of the assassins dodged and ducked, blocking with the steel in his own hand as sparks leapt from the contact of the metal, Xiao Jingrui's next stroke still fell ruthlessly and unrelentingly.

His palm struck squarely onto the other's chest, and his opponent flew through the air like a kite cut from its string, and it was only then that Xiao Jingrui realized something wasn't right, but it was too late to take it back, as the leader of the assassins had already used the power of his strike to fly through the air like an arrow, breaking open the door and charging into the main building.

As far as Xiao Jingrui knew and for as long as he had known him,

within this master building, there only dwelled the thin, frail Mei Changsu, who did not keep even a servant by his side.

“Brother Su!”

With a piercing cry, Xiao Jingrui rushed up the steps and leapt over the shattered door into the dark, dim room within.

The stench of blood hit him full in the face, but even with his frighteningly accurate night vision, he could only see a figure motionless in the center of the room.

Before he could react, a bright light flared as the lamp on the desk was lit, and in the soft glow, he saw Mei Changsu standing there, draped in a long fur coat, one hand holding onto the table, his clear, pure complexion appearing harsh in the candlelight.

Xiao Jingrui’s gaze fell onto the small bow he had casually placed onto the table – a vermilion-red bow with an ink-black bowstring, a knot of white jade, and a pattern as intricate as teardrops.

“‘Draw-in-Vain’?”

“Yes, this is the mighty crossbow made by the Ban family, ‘Draw-in-Vain’,” Mei Changsu answered.

“Jinling is truly unlike any other place, to have forced me to use this.”

Xiao Jingrui lowered his head and saw that the body of the leader of the assassins was lying not far from his feet, an elaborate little arrow stuck firmly into the center of his throat.

Although his chest was soaked in red blood, it was obviously blood he had spit out from the last hit he had received from Xiao Jingrui’s own hand, whereas the wound in his throat had been made with such incredible marksmanship that it had caused his muscles to contract, and not a drop of blood had been spilled.

One could only imagine the sharpness of the eyes that had watched and waited in the darkness, and the steadiness of the

hands that had fired the arrow.

“It would be best for you not to look.”

Seeing that Xiao Jingrui was about to pull away the dark cloth obscuring the assassin’s face, Mei Changsu stopped him in a quiet voice.

“It is so late, I had not thought you would come.”

“I heard Brother Su met some mishap today out on the road, and was worried.

It was only after I rushed over that I realized it was so late.”

Xiao Jingrui’s fingers were already grasping the corner of the cloth, but a nameless hesitation rose in his heart, and he did not immediately pull it away.

He was not Xie Bi, he had been raised from young in the jianghu world, and knew jianghu well, he had killed with his own hands, and had seen the kind of jianghu battles that ended with a ground full of bodies, and so he was not afraid of corpses, and no matter how gruesome the sight, it would not have frightened the second-ranked gentleman of the Langya Lists, the young master Xiao.

But Brother Su had said...”it would be best for you not to look”....

The intruder was lying before him, his face covered by the dark cloth, and no matter whether he looked or not, it would remain the same face.

Just like certain truths which, no matter whether he understood them or not, would exist forever, regardless of his actions.

Xiao Jingrui clenched his teeth and finally drew aside the thin cloth, which seemed to weigh a thousand pounds.

After a single glance, his gaze faltered.

His hand slowly clenched into a fist, the muscles on his face convulsing in distress.

It was a face which seemed both unfamiliar and familiar.

Unfamiliar, because he had never greeted it or spoken with it, and didn't know its owner's name or position.

Familiar, because he saw it often, because it was always by his father's side, following behind him, obeying and executing trivial orders.

If this face had not been enough to answer his questions, the silence all around him would have, seeming to slowly close in on him like a net, tightening around Xiao Jingrui's heart.

The more absolute the quiet, the more sounds he could hear within it.

The sound of the wind blowing in the night, the sound of the snow drifting to the ground, the beating of his heart, the rise and fall of his breath...he could hear everything he should not have been able to hear, and yet there was not the slightest hint of the sounds he should have been able to hear.

In this grand, stately residence of the Marquis of Ning, the clashing of swords and the cries of the fighters had rang out into the quiet night sky, but like a pebble tossed into an old well, aside from the small tremors of its ripples, there had been no other response.

Fei Liu had long since taken care of all the enemies outside in the courtyard, but he had not come back in, and Xiao Jingrui did not know what he was doing.

The smell of blood was dissipating into the night, becoming almost unnoticeable.

No one had come to help, no one had even come to look, and it seemed as if the entire Xie residence had not heard anything, but was still slumbering quietly, waiting for the dawn of the next day.

"Jingrui," Mei Changsu's steady voice rang out, as if he had not noticed the terrified expression of the young man before him, and

he continued calmly, “The manor I went to see today was recommended by Commander Meng, and is near Changji lane.

The place is clean and solid, and has all the basic utilities needed for daily living, and although the scenery of the garden is somewhat lacking, it will be a good opportunity for me to redesign it entirely.

And so...it is time for me to move out....”

“Move out...” Xiao Jingrui’s gaze was still fixed dazedly on the corpse before him, and he murmured, “Yes, it is time to move out, this Snow Cottage is not fit to be lived in any longer....”

“Jingrui, listen to me.”

Mei Changsu put his hand on the young man’s shoulder, gripping it gently.

“Go back to your rooms now, as if you had not come to Snow Cottage tonight, as if everything you have seen was only a bad dream.

Tomorrow, go out with Yujin and relax a bit, as if everything is as it always was.

You cannot let your imagination run wild, and cause your mother to worry....”

“Can everything...really be as it was?”

Xiao Jingrui stood, and looked into Mei Changsu’s eyes.

“I do not want to know why my father wants to kill you, I only want to know...why did you have to get swept up into the whirlpool of Jinling?

You were the kind of jianghu person I admired the most – carefree and easy, without worry or constraints...”

Mei Changsu gave him a bitter smile, looking into the light of the lamp on the desk.

“You are wrong, there has never been anyone carefree in this world, so long as a person has sentiments and hopes, he can never be carefree.”

“But you could have avoided this....”

“Jingrui,” Mei Changsu raised his gaze, his expression becoming just slightly cold.

“You are not me, do not judge in my place.

Go back now, I will leave early tomorrow.

I have received your care and protection these many days in Snow Cottage.

Once I have settled into my new manor, if you wish, you are welcome as my guest any time.”

Xiao Jingrui looked at him in a daze and asked, “In the future, I can still come?”

A smile spread across Mei Changsu’s face.

“Why not?

I only fear you would not wish to come, you never know.”

Xiao Jingrui thought about the chaos of the current situation, and about how he and his father now stood on opposing sides, and felt as if his heart had been tied into tangled knots, and stood there at a loss.

He had originally thought that it was only Xie Bi who had gotten involved with palace politics, and had thought nothing much of it, believing that, should anything happen in the future, they could always rely on the respective statuses of the Marquis of Ning and the Grand Princess for protection, but today, he had suddenly discovered that his father was not as neutral as he appeared, and had only now come to understand just how deeply the Xie family had woven itself into the affairs of the court.

Even though he had never paid much attention to it, and had

always kept an easy, carefree life away from the palace, he was still a part of the Xie family, and so could not completely avoid caring about the matter.

Thinking about it now, the words Yan Yujin had spoken to him in the grasslands that day had truly been full of foresight.

“Things have not come to this point yet, what is the use in worrying?”

Mei Changsu seemed to know the thoughts of his heart, and said with a gentle smile, “You only have to hold fast to your pure honesty, and there will be nothing you cannot endure.

Like the snow falling outside – although it is coming down heavier and heavier, you and I both know, there will be at time when it stops.”

As if in response to his words, a gust of wind and snow blew in through the shattered doorway, bringing in a bout of cold and a human figure.

Fei Liu reached out a hand, picked up the body on the ground, and easily pulled it back outside.

Xiao Jingrui followed him to the door and saw him give it a casual swing, throwing it over the wall, and when he looked beyond him to the courtyard, he saw that it was empty and neat, clean of the previous mess.

“You’re just going to throw them out like this?”

Xiao Jingrui was taken aback.

“It’s fine,”

it was Mei Changsu who answered.

“Someone will deal with them once they are outside.”

Xiao Jingrui listened to his ice-like tone, which was nothing like the warm Brother Su he had met in those early days, and felt his heart shudder, a shiver running down his back.

Fei Liu had already returned, and now grasped Mei Changsu by the hand.

“Together!”

“Alright,” Mei Changsu smiled at him softly, his manner changing swiftly but naturally.

“Su gege will return with you to the west building to sleep.

Go and see Xiao gege out first, alright?”

Fei Liu turned and fixed the dazed Xiao Jingrui with his gaze.

“No!”

“Fei Liu....”

“No need, no need,” Xiao Jingrui seemed to wake up, an indescribable pain rising up in his heart as he answered sadly, “You go rest, I will leave now.

For the rest of the night...be careful.”

Mei Changsu laughed lightly and nodded, watching as Xiao Jingrui walked heavily out of the room into the courtyard, the small smile on his face fading into quiet grief.

From the back, the young man’s head was lowered, the originally tall and straight figure now seeming slightly crooked, as if something heavy weighed on his forehead, which he must bear, and bear bitterly.

What this young man must face in the future, perhaps only Mei Changsu himself knew, and the schemes held in his chest felt like ice and iron as they seemed to whisper to him, even if you know, everything that should happen will still happen according to the path which has which has already been laid.

“It has only just begun...Jingrui...I hope you can endure all of this....”

After this soft murmur, Mei Changsu gathered up the sympathy

that had spilled out inadvertently, then took Fei Liu by the hand and slowly returned to the west room.

Chapter 46: Guests at the New Manor

The snow fell continuously for three days.

In its midst, Mei Changsu quietly moved to his new residence without purposefully notify anyone, but within a few days, everyone who should know had already found out.

The Mu residence and the Yu residence naturally sent over many gifts of good wishes for the new manor, and the palace also bestowed upon him royal gifts of chains of jewels and bolts of cloth, and it was said that Princess Jingning had been involved in their preparation.

Xuanjing Officer Xia Dong turned up empty-handed and gave herself a tour around the manor, then dropped a single sentence, “What an ugly courtyard!”, and left.

But the other guests who came to visit didn’t dare make any similar comments because everyone knew that this manor had been recommended by Commander Meng, and what could you expect from the tastes of these martial arts experts?

Xiao Jingrui, Yan Yujin, and Xie Bi also naturally came as guests, but the joyful atmosphere of their earlier days was long gone, and only Yan Yujin tried hard to chat about interesting topics, trying to cheer everyone up, but Xiao Jingrui didn’t reply much, and even Xie Bi, for some reason, seemed dazed and half-asleep.

Mei Changsu took the opportunity to persuade the three to leave the capital, and to visit the neighbouring Huqiu hot springs to relax for a few days.

“It is indeed the right season to visit the hot springs,” Yan Yujin seemed interested by his suggestion.

“But never mind Jingrui, I can take him with me anytime, only, I’m afraid Xie Bi can’t leave so easily whenever he pleases, he is not like us idlers, he has many things to take care of every day, and

going for a visit to the Huqiu hot springs would probably take at least half a month.”

He had just finished speaking when Xie Bi suddenly struck the table and said, “Why can’t I go, come on, let’s go together...”

“Do you have a fever?”

Yan Yujin reached out a hand to feel his forehead.

“Every day you talk about how busy you are, how are you suddenly not busy?”

Xie Bi looked blank for a moment, and then his expression became sad.

“I’m not busy anymore...there isn’t much to do....”

Yan Yujin saw that he was speaking the truth, and was taken aback, but Xiao Jingrui was already reaching out a hand to grip Xie Bi’s shoulder, saying, “Second Brother, don’t think so much, Brother Su is right, the Huqiu hot springs are a good place to relax, I will go with you and put down our worries for awhile...before coming back...”

Mei Changsu’s heart gave a quiet sigh, and he was about to speak when one of the new servants came bounding over to report, “Mister, His Highness Prince Yu has arrived.”

Xie Bi jumped and looked around helplessly.

Mei Changsu understood his feelings, and said quietly, “If you don’t mind, you can leave by the side door, is that alright?”

Yan Yujin looked from one to the other, and although he did not understand why Xie Bi was suddenly afraid to see Prince Yu, he knew that there must be a reason, and so didn’t say anything, but followed after the two brothers as they were led away by the servant.

Mei Changsu had just arrived at the outer courtyard when Prince Yu entered in plain clothes and a snow cap, a modest smile on his

face, adeptly giving off an air of deep respect for the wisdom before him, and when he saw Mei Changsu bend over in a bow, he hurried forward and reached out a hand to stop him, saying with a smile, "I have taken advantage of the snow to come visit you, and am here only as a friend, please do not stand on ceremony."

Mei Changsu gave a small smile and straightened.

Prince Yu turned and looked around the courtyard, as if preparing to speak some words of praise, but then balked for a long moment, and finally only managed, "This courtyard is open and bright, and its design is austere and interesting...."

Mei Changu did not reply, but only smiled and raised a hand to invite Prince Yu into the study room, which had just been decorated, and ordered for tea to be brought.

"You have just moved into a new residence, I wonder if you have enough servants at hand?

I have a few girls, quite beautiful, and very well trained, if you do not mind...."

"I thank Your Highness for your offer,"

Mei Changsu half-rose in a bow.

"I am a jianghu man, and have not taken a wife, and so am not too used to being served by young girls.

As it happens, I have some old friends in the capital, and they have sent over some people who are quite competent, but if I have any such need in the future, I will come to Your Highness."

Prince Yu had only made the offer out of politeness and had not really expected him to accept it, and so was not surprised by the refusal, and let his gaze roam around the study until it landed on the desk.

"Is this your work?

It is very well-drawn!"

“It is only a rough draft,” Mei Changsu smiled.

“Although Your Highness thinks the design of this manor is interesting, my tastes are a bit more conventional.

This is the plan of the scenery and decoration of the courtyard, and I am preparing to have the manor renovated according to this design in the spring, after the snow has melted.”

“Aiya, is it only a draft?

It is already so charming – look at this matching of the foliage, the layout of the paths, all arranged so elegantly in this irregular pattern, if the artist did not hold the whole picture in his mind, he certainly would not be able to produce such a detailed design.”

Prince Yu had already paid his manor several undeserved compliments, so now that there was something actually worthy of praise, of course he seized the opportunity with both hands.

“If this manor is really redesigned according to this plan, it will definitely become the most beautiful manor in Jinling.

I say, that would be a manor worthy of Mister Mei of Jiangzuo Alliance!”

“Your Highness gives me too much praise.

It was really Commander Meng who chose well, the first time I came, I found that the location and setting of this manor was suitable, and the price was so reasonable that I decided to buy it.

Fortunately, my luck was good this time, and I did not come across another situation like that of Lan Manor, and now that I have stayed here for a few days, I find it very comfortable.”

Hearing him bring up Lan Manor, Prince Yu was delighted, and left the desk to return to sit beside him, saying, “That strange case of the corpses in the well of Lan Manor must have given Mister Su a fright.

I hear the case has had a preliminary ruling in the Capital

Magistrate Office, did you know?”

“How could a commoner such as I know about the great cases of the court....”

Mei Changsu laughed.

Prince Yu thought, you were the one who uncovered this old case as revenge against Lou Zhijing, do you expect me to believe you are not following every step of its sentencing?

But he showed no sign of these thoughts on his face, and instead gave a warm smile, saying with a laugh, “This case really is strange, it is just an ordinary criminal case, but it involves a number of court officials.

And so, because of this, Capital Magistrate Gao Sheng went to the Ministry of Justice and said that, since ministers of the second rank or higher had been found to be involved in the case, the Capital Magistrate Office no longer had the power to remain the principal investigating office, and then he immediately handed over all the evidence and witnesses, he really does do things properly.”

Mei Changsu looked at the pleased expression on Prince Yu’s face and smiled in his heart.

Although Gao Sheng did not belong to either party, he still did not dare to tamper with case evidence just because of a little pressure from the Crown Prince, and so he was originally in distress over how to handle the dilemma, but coincidentally, his old master had made a suggestion regarding He Wenxin’s murder case, advising him to hastily hand the whole thing over to his superiors, and had suddenly inadvertently reminded him of this option for the Lan manor case as well, and so he had immediately gone to question Shi Douguan through the night, and as soon as he hit upon the name “Lou Zhijing”, he instantly stopped and did not ask even a single additional detail, but took the whole case to the Ministry of Justice on the premise of ‘involvement of ministers of

the second-rank and above', and so in a single day, he had gotten rid of two difficult cases that could have offended important and powerful people, and so that night, he finally went to sleep with a light heart.

After all this, he could only say that, though his luck had been truly bad this year, at least he had managed to preserve his life and those of his wife and children, and if he could be transferred to another post in the future, then he would count it an unexpected blessing.

Gao Sheng's cautious evasion had played right into Prince Yu's wishes, as now these two cases, one to his disadvantage, and one to his very great advantage, had both fallen into the hands of the Ministry of Justice, whose head, Qi Min, was quick and clever as well as his faithful subordinate for many years, and so Prince Yu couldn't help being in an extremely good mood.

Remembering that Lou Zhijing was an enemy of Jiangzuo Alliance and that the 'corpses in the well' case had been uncovered by Mei Changsu's own hand, of course he had to come over to deliver his personal gratitude.

"I hear...the Lan manor case has involved Minister Lou of the Ministry of Appointments?"

It seemed this Mei Changsu was truly clever, and as soon as he heard that the case had been reported to the Ministry of Justice, his expression grew troubled.

"I wonder if the Ministry of Justice has the right to investigate ministers of the same rank as itself?"

"You are probably not familiar with the rules of the court, investigation by a single department is naturally not possible, but as long as the evidence and witnesses are intact, they can report it to His Majesty and request for the head of the High Bureau of Justice to join the investigation, and so two departments will investigate one, and then they will no longer be restricted by the

problem of the same rank.”

“I see.”

Understanding spread across Mei Changsu’s expression.

“But because the case had been investigated in the Ministry of Justice up until now, the head of the High Bureau of Justice will not be familiar with the details, and so the whole process will still be mainly overseen by the Minister of Justice, is that correct?”

“Naturally.

Lou Zhijing is a despicable, immoral person, preying on the weak and innocent, and the Ministry of Justice will certainly not handle him lightly, don’t worry.”

Su Zhe had only reported the case, and was not the original victim, so telling him not to worry seemed out of place, but after hearing this, Mei Changsu only nodded in silence and did not express any words of protest, as if he was tacitly acknowledging his personal enmity with Lou Zhijing, and this made Prince Yu even more confident that he was leaning towards himself.

He felt almost as if they were fellow strategists plotting together, and as he grew more and more joyful, a question that he had planned to raise later now came pouring forth.

“Is Mister Su aware of the ‘Bin province land infringement case’?”

Mei Changsu lowered his head to take a sip of tea, and nodded indifferently.

“Yes, on the road to Jinling, we came across the couple who made the accusation.”

Prince Yu suddenly got up and clasped his hands in a formal greeting, saying, “This case is causing me great distress, pray Mister Su give me his advice.”

Mei Changsu gazed at him for a long moment, then said quietly,

“His Majesty has finally decided to open this case?”

“Yes, Father Emperor summoned me and the Crown Prince into the palace today to ask our views regarding this land infringement case, and finally...he decided to hand the case over to Prince Jing to investigate, with the help of the heads of the three departments....”

Mei Changsu’s expression did not change, as he asked, “How did Your Highness and the Crown Prince respond to His Majesty’s decision?”

“Neither of us objected....”

Prince Yu sighed.

“The Crown Prince did not protest because he knew that Father would never agree to give the case to him, so as long as it did not fall into my hands, he was already very satisfied, not to mention Prince Jing has always been upright and just.”

“And Your Highness?”

“I did not dare protest, for fear Father would grow suspicious.

Mister Su should be aware that I have a close relationship with the Duke of Qing....”

Prince Yu looked worried.

“That the case did not fall into the hands of the Crown Prince is already a great fortune, but I am worried that, with Jingyan’s rigid nature, it will not be easy to interfere.”

“Didn’t Your Highness protect Prince Jing in front of His Majesty over the matter of the Princess not long ago?

That would count as a favour, no?”

Prince Yu smiled bitterly.

“It is indeed a favour, but it will not be enough to persuade Prince Jing to listen to me.

Perhaps Mister Su does not know what kind of person Jingyan is, to tell the truth, I have never met anyone so stubborn and unyielding, and even Father sometimes cannot handle him....”

“Then Your Highness wants me to find a way to restrain Prince Jing, so that he will handle this land infringement case according to Your Highness’ wishes?”

“If you have any ideas, I would be endlessly grateful.”

“Then dare I ask Your Highness, how would you wish this land infringement case handled?”

“It would be best if it could be proven to be just a false claim by foolish commoners.

If that is not possible, then the main goal is to suppress the whole thing.”

Mei Changsu gave him a long look and then suddenly laughed grimly.

“Your Highness, are you still dwelling in the dreams of last night’s sleep?

Do you think the evidence the Xuanjing Bureau has brought back is just for show?”

Prince Yu coughed, but because he had been putting up this benevolent front for so long, he had grown accustomed to giving a show of magnanimity, and so not only did he not get angry, he actually looked a bit embarrassed as he replied, “This...is a bit difficult, and so it is more important than ever to have Prince Jing’s protection, because no matter what, as long as the Duke of Qing is found to be ignorant of the whole matter, it doesn’t matter how the rest of the case is sentenced.”

Mei Changsu’s lip curled, and he gazed deeply at Prince Yu for a long time, until Prince Yu grew a bit uneasy, and finally said coolly, “If Your Highness truly harbours such intentions, then I must ask bluntly, since there are a thousand paths to choose from,

why choose one that leads to a dead end?”

Prince Yu looked taken aback.

“What is the meaning of these words?”

“Your Highness is a wise and renowned royal prince, heavily favoured by His Majesty and popular among the court ministers, so that you can even compete with the Crown Prince.

But Your Highness has forgotten, no matter how powerful Your Highness becomes, in all of Da Liang, there is one person Your Highness can never, ever make your enemy.”

There was a hint of a smile as cold as ice at the corner of Mei Changsu’s mouth, and his every word cut like a knife.

“That person is our Emperor, your father.”

Prince Yu quickly got up, protesting, “When have I ever thought to make an enemy of Father Emperor?”

“Then who does Your Highness think is behind the opening of this case?

The Crown Prince?

Prince Jing?

No, it is His Majesty!

His Majesty spent so much effort finding someone like Prince Jing to lead the investigation, why?

Isn’t it because he wants to use this case as an example to put a stop to the current trend of land infringement crimes?

When you and the Crown Prince fight, what the two of you care about is the throne, but to His Majesty the Emperor, he still has to govern the nation, and so he will tolerate your quarrels, but he would never allow them to interfere with the management of national affairs.

When His Majesty sent a Xuanjing Officer to investigate this case,

when he decided to hand it over to Prince Jing for sentencing, it shows that His Majesty already has a predetermined conclusion for this matter in his mind, and if his plan is disrupted because of Your Highness' own meddling, then who is the person you will most anger?

In order to protect one Duke of Qing, you will lose all of His Majesty's favour, have you weighed this balance?"

Hearing this, a cold sweat was breaking out on Prince Yu's forehead, and he sat there in a daze, reaching out a hand to grasp at his tea cup and then draining its contents in one swallow.

"Your Highness," Mei Changsu continued relentlessly, a shred of coldness seeping into his voice.

"You lost the Duke of Qing long ago, you must understand this."

Chapter 47: Relinquished Pawn

He had lost the Duke of Qing long ago....

Mei Changsu was not the first to arrive at this conclusion, as many of the strategists of Prince Yu's residence had mentioned this at their meeting, but at the time, everyone had focused on the unyielding character of the principal investigator, Prince Jing, and the evidence collected in person by the Xuanjing Bureau, and about how it would be almost impossible to overturn this case, and so the conversation had dwelt on the practicalities of the issue, leaving Prince Yu with a shred of hope in his heart.

But today, Mei Changsu had wasted no time in addressing the heart of the matter, and had bluntly pointed out that he had lost the Duke of Qing, not because it would be difficult to protect him, but because he simply could not be protected.

Unlike the Crown Prince, Prince Yu possessed a good sense of judgement himself, and as soon as Mei Changsu raised this point, he knew that it was the truth, and his keen attention suddenly vanished, his heart sinking.

In truth, he had no personal sentiment towards the Duke of Qing, but he was the only minister on the military side to publicly support Prince Yu, and by the power of his seniority, he could easily raise the support of a number of his disciples and old friends, and so for this reason was all the more valuable.

If it were only a few days ago, he could have accepted this loss, heavy as it was, but ever since Qin Banruo had informed him secretly that Xie Yu was actually supporting the Crown Prince, he had become more and more aware of the Duke of Qing's importance.

According to the court system of Da Liang, there was a strict divide between civil and military positions, where civil officials could not be granted the title of 'Marquis', military officials could

not participate in politics, and no minister below the first rank could hold both civil and military titles.

Civil ministers could rely on reviews of their work as well as the favour of their superiors and the Emperor for promotions in rank, but the elevation of the ranks of military officials had to rely on their military deeds, and not only the favour of the Emperor.

It was because of this tradition that the majority of military officials remained uninterested in matters unrelated to the army, such as the fight for the crown, because even if they took the great risk of choosing a side, they could not gain any real reward or elevation in rank without actual military accomplishments, so since it was not a gamble worth the price, why not just enjoy the show from the sidelines?

Only those military officials who had already earned a first-rank status by their military service and had been granted the rank of 'Marquis' or 'Commander' were not restrained by this limitation, and could receive any titles granted by the Emperor, as well as salaries exceeding those of their rank and gifts and rewards to their families and inheritance.

Of the military officials in all of Da Liang, there were only about five of such a rank.

And so, the choices of these five represented in large part the preferences of most of the military officials, although, of these five, aside from the Duke of Qing, who openly supported Prince Yu, and the Marquis of Ning, who secretly supported the Crown Prince, the rest seemed to be keeping out of the conflict.

Of course, when deciding who would inherit the throne, eight parts of the Emperor's decision would be based on the Crown Prince and Prince Yu's performance in the tasks for which they were responsible and their ability to gain power amidst the six departments of the court, but the remaining two parts would also take into consideration the preferences of the military.

Although Prince Yu was confident that he had the upper hand in the first eight parts, he knew he had not managed to widen the gap by much, and so the remaining two parts still had great importance to the overall outcome.

Not to mention, the attitudes of the military officials had always been difficult to determine, because most of them took no chances, and never betrayed any hint of bias, shaking their heads tight-lipped if anyone tried to ask, and only at the very last moment when the Emperor asked them personally would they lean close to the imperial ear to softly whisper a name, not letting the sound carry to even a single bystander.

Although this would not gain them any great favour from the newly chosen Emperor, it also avoided any great mishaps, and was the preferred method of those without much ambition.

And so from this it can be seen how rare and valuable the public support of a first-ranked military official was to Prince Yu.

“Mister Su does not know,” Prince Yu let out a sigh, and confided, “I had always believed that I had the advantage over the Crown Prince in recruiting the support of the military officials, because I had the Duke of Qing, as well as Xie Bi, and never had to worry about the military side of things.

But in the end, after all my planning, I still never could have thought that the Marquis of Ning was actually playing both sides, and when he did not openly object to Xie Bi being taken under my wing, I thought he was leaning towards me, but he had actually been secretly supporting the Crown Prince all along, and single-handedly raised up this ‘land infringement’ case to remove the Duke of Qing...and now, I have no way to know the preferences of the military, and I fear that when the moment comes, I will fall because of this weakness....”

Mei Changsu listened quietly to Prince Yu’s laments, and aside from nodding slightly, did not show any other expression.

Prince Yu's gaze seemed to flicker at this response, but his expression was controlled, and he closed his eyes briefly, then gave a bitter smile and said ruefully, "Aiya, it is my own recklessness.

I have forgotten that Mister Su has a very good relationship with the two noble sons of the Marquis of Ning....

I have made things difficult for you with these words...."

Mei Changsu's expression did not change, and he did not deny it, only lowering his head slightly.

"But to my knowledge, although Mister Su is good friends with Jingrui and Xie Bi, you are also intimate friends with Princess Nihuang, and have even dared to anger the Crown Prince for her sake...."

Prince Yu gazed at Mei Changsu and continued, "Perhaps that was not your original intention, but as the deed has been done, it cannot be taken back now.

If I have guessed correctly, there has also been some ulterior motive to your leaving Snow Cottage amidst the snowstorm in such a hurry?"

"Where have Your Highness' thoughts gone to?"

There was a hint of something forced about Mei Changsu's light smile.

"I am only a jianghu man, without worries or cares, and wasn't used to the Marquis' grand residence, and so moved out as soon as possible.

As for the Crown Prince's misunderstanding towards me, if there is an opportunity, I will be able to explain it clearly to him."

Hearing the hidden rejection in this reply, Prince Yu's eye twitched and his brow furrowed in anger, but only for a short moment, before he immediately suppressed his fury again.

At this moment, it was even more important not to appear as

narrow-minded and petty as the Crown Prince, or he would lose the opportunity to obtain what he wanted...this was what Prince Yu was telling himself.

Since Mei Changsu had left Lang province to enter Jinling, it must mean that he had understood in his heart that he could not avoid the fate laid on him by the words of Langya Hall, and so had prepared himself to choose a master.

In these forced circumstances, he would choose whoever seemed the most generous, and whoever made him feel safest.

And once he had made up his mind and chosen a side, this qilin prodigy would certainly not hold back.

This was because Mei Changsu really valued his Jiangzuo Alliance too much.

If the side he chose should come to lose the fight for the throne, Jiangzuo Alliance would undoubtedly suffer from the losses of their chief, and no matter what, Mei Changsu would not let this happen.

So as long as Prince Yu could gain his loyalty and ensure that he had no further contact with the enemy, he could tie his own fate with that of Mei Changsu and Jiangzuo Alliance, and from then on, he could make full use of his talent and abilities without worry.

This was the plan Prince Yu had devised after Qin Banruo had asked him that day, “Then if Your Highness can take Mei Changsu as your subordinate before the Crown Prince can act, are you willing to trust him unconditionally?”

And it was a plan he was confident would be able to trap the abilities of this qilin prodigy and use them to their fullest.

But first, of course, he had to catch him in his net.

“Mister Su was willing to advise me on the matter of the land infringement case today, and for this I am endlessly grateful.

As for the future, I do not dare to force anything.”

With his warm smile and humble temperament, Prince Yu had perfectly captured the air of a gentle, kindly prince.

“With your great talent, you will naturally grasp the situation with your singular insight, and what more could I add?

I only wish to say, no matter how you choose in the future, no matter where fate leads us, so long as you are willing to look on me with favour, the gate of the imperial Yu residence will forever be open to you.”

These words were truly dignified and well-spoken, and Mei Changsu felt the quietly touched expression he had pasted on his face become a little more natural, and Prince Yu, who was watching his face closely, was delighted.

“I have disturbed you long enough today, and have detained you from your rest, so I will take my leave now.”

Prince Yu knew that some things could no be rushed, and seeing that Mei Changsu seemed moved, he chose to retreat instead, and smilingly rose in farewell, forcing down the distress he felt over the Duke of Qing, and thus showed himself to be quite a character indeed.

Mei Changsu also rose and bent forward in a bow.

“Your Highness braved the cold to come personally to my humble residence, how could it be called a disturbance?

The day is late, and by courtesy I should invite Your Highness to stay for a meal, but Your Highness has a thousand responsibilities and little time for leisure, and so I do not dare make this offer.

I have only offered tea today, and my hospitality is most lacking, pray Your Highness forgive me.”

After saying this, he lifted a hand, as if intending to accompany his guest out.

Of course, Prince Yu would have been delighted to stay, but Mei Changsu's words seemed to be asking him to stay and leave at the same time, and he could not grasp his true intention, and if he made an error in judgement, he feared it would show that he had no mutual understanding with the qilin prodigy, and many thoughts flew across his mind but he could not decide on any one of them, so he only slowed his footsteps, hoping Mei Changsu would speak again.

Fortunately, the heavens smiled on him, and as the two left the study side by side, walking along the corridors to the pavilion at their center, Mei Changsu lifted his gaze to the clouds at the hazy horizon, and said quietly, "Your Highness Prince Yu does not need to be overly concerned.

Even if the Duke of Qing survived this round, he is no match for Xie Yu, and so it is no great loss...."

"That may be so," Prince Yu frowned.

"But he has some weight in the court, and it is certainly better to have him than not."

Mei Changsu smiled indifferently.

"In my humble opinion, I think Your Highness should completely cast aside the Duke of Qing, and throw your support behind Prince Jing."

"Support Prince Jing?"

Prince Yu was really a little shocked.

"He is a prince, and has the imperial edict to carry out his investigation, who would dare to stop him?"

Why would he need my support?"

"He would not, if it were only a matter of the Bin province case."

Mei Changsu had halted, and continued quietly.

"But Your Highness knows that this case is only the beginning,

and once it has been judged, there will immediately be an influx of a large number of similar cases making accusations against many more noble houses.

Prince Jing has no experience in handling complicated matters of this nature.

If at this time, Your Highness is willing to intervene, and help him quickly calm the waves of protest raised by these noble houses, and maintain the stability of His Majesty's national affairs, how could Prince Jing not be grateful to Your Highness?"

Prince Yu's breathing slowed, and he suddenly seemed to see a whole new direction that he had not noticed before, and a light was growing slowly in his mind.

"You mean...."

Mei Changsu continued coolly, "What does the Duke of Qing has that he is worth Your Highness' lament, could even two Dukes of Qing compare with half of a Prince Jing?"

Prince Yu's expression jumped, and his face was flushed as he paced in a quick circle.

"If I could acquire Prince Jing, then of course...but with Prince Jing's character...I fear I would not be able to handle him...."

Mei Changsu's gaze was like snow, piercing through Prince Yu like the blade of a knife.

"Even if he cannot be handled, you must handle him.

The Marquis of Ning has already chosen the Crown Prince, and besides Prince Jing, who among the military could compete against him?"

Prince Yu knew these words were not empty, and his brow had furrowed into a single line.

"It is true that no one else could openly match Xie Yu.

But Jingyan is stubborn, and I fear when I need to use him, he

would not obey my orders and deploy his soldiers...”

Mei Changsu turned and met Prince Yu’s eyes, saying very slowly, “Why does Your Highness want to control the military?

Are you preparing to force the Emperor to abdicate or to start a rebellion?”

Prince Yu’s heart stopped in fear, and he glanced around him quickly before saying furiously, “What is the meaning of these words?

If I harboured any such intentions, the heavens would not tolerate me!”

“So since you are intending neither to force an abdication or start rebellion, where did the words “deploy his soldiers” come from?”

Mei Changsu’s tone was like ice.

“Prince Jing’s function is only to intimidate.

Even if the Crown Prince has Xie Yu, or even a few other first-ranked Marquis, it would not mean anything, as long as Your Highness has Prince Jing and Princess Nihuang, and in His Majesty’s eyes, the influence you and the Crown Prince hold over the military is at least equal, so that you do not lose to him in this respect.

So long as you never intend to step onto the path of treason, all of this is only a bargaining chip, and is only to put on a show for His Majesty, and will never actually need to be used.”

All of Prince Yu’s strategists often analyzed palace politics in front of him, but no one had ever come up with such a novel perspective, and he felt as if a new path was opening before him, and the turmoil in his mind was slowly beginning to brighten.

It was true, the military was not like court officials, and there was no need to gain complete control over them, because with the Emperor’s personal Yulin army in Jinling, and Meng Zhi’s strict

vigilance over the city, there was no possibility of seizing the throne by force, and so, since he only needed the appearance of military power, so what was the use of total obedience?

Seeing Prince Yu's changing expression, Mei Changsu knew that he had been moved in his heart, and the corner of his lip turned up as he casually added, "Even if we speculate wildly and say the Crown Prince chose to act rashly, once His Majesty is endangered, do you really think that Prince Jing, with his rigid and upright character, would need your orders to act?"

Chapter 48: Fei Liu's Present

It took two whole hours for Mei Changsu to see his guest out.

Before climbing onto his palanquin, Prince Yu purposefully pulled him out from under the cover of the doorway, and grasped his shoulder warmly as he urged, "Your health is not good, don't linger here in the wind."

Mei Changsu looked at him and thought, I was in the shelter when you pulled me out, why do you bother putting on this caring facade?

But he only smiled and replied, "It is truly cold out here, Your Highness, hurry and enter your palanquin, and forgive me for not seeing you out."

Prince Yu had fulfilled his intention of giving this show of generosity and kindness on the street outside the manor and was deeply satisfied, and as the snow and wind was blowing against his face uncomfortably,

he gave up any further pretense and turned to climb into the palanquin.

As soon as the palanquin was lifted, Mei Changsu turned and reentered the manor, then walked quickly to the shadows beside the walls and vomited a few times, as if he were trying to expel some foulness from within himself.

"Su gege..."

He turned his head to see Fei Liu standing there, head cocked and eyes wide, his expression full of concern.

"It's alright," his lip turned up involuntarily as he took the youth's hand.

"I was just playing with a poisonous snake, and afterwards, became a little nauseous..."

“Poison snake?!”

Fei Liu was instantly on the alert, looking sharply all around him, trying to find this poisonous snake.

“It’s already crawled out,”

Mei Changsu couldn’t help smiling.

“No matter, Su gege has known this poisonous snake for a long time, and knows where its poison is hidden, and so won’t be bitten.”

“Cannot bite!”

“That’s right, with our Fei Liu here, who would dare to bite me?”

Mei Changsu stroked the youth’s head, his voice growing quieter.

“And anyway...Su gege himself...has now become a poisonous snake too....”

Fei Liu’s delicate eyebrows furrowed, and though he did not understand the meaning of Mei Changsu’s words, he felt the sorrow behind them, and immediately leaned against him, shaking his head vigorously.

“Not!”

“Not a poisonous snake?”

Then what am I?”

Mei Changsu knew that his emotions had affected Fei Liu and he hurriedly composed himself, then said with a smile, “A poisonous spider?”

A poisonous lizard?

Or a scorpion?”

Fei Liu was growing upset, his handsome face drawn tight as he shouted, “None of them!”

Mei Changsu laughed as he patted the youth’s back comfortingly.

“Alright, alright, none of them... let us go back to the house, tomorrow, Fei Liu has to go out with Su gege, alright?”

Fei Liu nodded.

“Ng!

Hot spring!”

“No, not to the hot springs.”

Mei Changsu did not wonder how Fei Liu had heard about the hot springs, but smiled as he brushed at the flakes of snow on his forehead.

“Have you lost your little wooden eagle yet?

Tomorrow, we’re going to go see Tingsheng.”

As soon as he heard that they would be going to see Tingsheng, Fei Liu stopped his half-play half-training activities for the day, and started searching earnestly through every room in the manor.

Like all young boys, Fei Liu did not like to clean up after himself, and even a particularly beloved and interesting toy would somehow disappear after a day or two of play.

From past experience, it was no use looking for toys that had been lost, because they would usually miraculously turn up from some strange place after awhile.

But this time was different, and although Fei Liu had some mental deficits, he still knew that they had only just moved in and so there was virtually no chance of the little eagle turning up by itself in this new manor, and so he thought it would be better to look for it himself.

“Fei Liu, it’s time to eat.”

“No!”

“Fei Liu, if it’s lost, it’s lost, and you still have to eat.

Tingsheng won’t ask you about your little eagle tomorrow, and

even if he asks, you don't have to really tell him you've lost it.

Have you forgotten what Lin Chen gege taught you?

Children who cannot lie are not good children....”

Fei Liu flew into a humiliated rage.

“Still cannot!”

“Still haven't learned to lie?”

Mei Changsu bit back a laugh and continued in a soothing voice, “Never mind, take your time.

Our Fei Liu is so smart, he can learn such difficult martial arts, how could he not learn how to lie?

Don't worry, if Lin Chen gege laughs at you, Su gege will hit him for you.”

If Xiao Jingrui were here, he would certainly protest against the Jiangzuo Alliance's child-rearing methods, but unfortunately, he was not, and so Fei Liu did not realize there was any problem with the way he was being taught, and only thought of Lin Chen gege's teasing expression, and screwed up his face unhappily.

“Come on, come and eat,”

Mei Changsu went over and pulled the youth into the room.

“There's yellow chicken bought especially for you, see, have these two drumsticks.

How about this, tomorrow, you can bring a present to Tingsheng too, then everything will be fair, right?”

Fei Liu's eyes brightened as he looked up, his mouth full of chicken.

“What?”

“What present?

Let me think...”

Mei Changsu rubbed his chin.

“It should be something you like most....”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“Su gege!”

“You like Su gege most?”

Well, we certainly can’t give him that....”

Mei Changsu laughed.

“Then how about that gold-silk vest?”

“No!”

“Why not this time?”

“Don’t like.”

“You don’t like that gold-silk vest?”

Mei Changsu tightened his lip against the smile threatening to burst forth.

“But Fei Liu, you don’t like that vest because your martial arts are good, so you don’t need to wear it for protection, and that’s why it’s always lain forgotten at the bottom of your clothes chest.

But Tingsheng is different, he is young, and his martial arts are poor, and if he were to be bullied, as long he wore that vest, he wouldn’t get hurt even if someone hit him, so he would certainly like this gift.”

Fei Liu’s eyes widened as he thought seriously for a moment, but he had always believed Mei Changsu’s words without a doubt, and so soon he was nodding.

“That vest is in the box under your bed, take it out before you go to sleep tonight, and don’t forget to bring it with you tomorrow.”

“Ng!”

With the problem of the present solved, Fei Liu's worries disappeared, and with his usual ravenous appetite, he devoured seven-or eight-tenths of the dishes laid out on the table, so that by the time he set down his bowl, Mei Changsu had long since retreated off to one side and had finished several pages of his book.

The brazier in the house was burning merrily and Fei Liu's cheeks were red, so he took off his outer coat, padding over in his undershirt, and lay down with his head resting on Mei Changsu's knee, idly playing with the fur on his fur coat.

This was one of Fei Liu's favourite ways to relax.

But he had not relaxed for long when he lifted his head and turned a questioning gaze towards Mei Changsu.

"Go then."

Mei Changsu said the words indifferently, and did not add his usual warning: "but don't hurt anyone."

Fei Liu's slender but firm figure disappeared into the night, and soon, sounds of disturbance were heard from the roof, but they were not very intense, and did not last long.

Less than an hour later, the youth had returned to the room, his whole body still impeccably clean from head to toe, carrying only a faint reek of blood in his wake.

For the sake of peace and quiet in the future, there must be a strict and violent beginning.

No matter who it was this time, they must still receive a warning in blood –

Su Zhe's manor was even deadlier than the Marquis of Ning's residence, and those who came in such a way must be willing to pay the price with their lives.

"In a few days, the traps in the courtyard will be set, and Uncle Li and the rest will move in."

Mei Changsu peeled a tangerine, and fed a piece to Fei Liu.

“And then, there won’t be many people who will dare to come in without permission, how about that?”

Hearing that no one would trespass in the future, Fei Liu chewed at the tangerine in his mouth, his gaze full of disappointment.

“No more trespassers is also a good thing, Fei Liu can paint in peace and quiet, don’t you also love to paint?”

“Also love.”

“How about this, since you love painting but also love excitement, Su gege will find a chance for you to fight Uncle Meng, do you want that?”

“Want!”

Fei Liu’s eyes glowed as he opened his mouth for the next piece of tangerine.

“Alright, the fruit is done, it’s time to go to bed.”

Mei Changsu smilingly pushed Fei Liu upright.

“Go, and on your way, tell Aunt Zhang to bring me some hot water.”

Fei Liu obediently got up, reached out an arm to hug Mei Changsu, then went to the side building and called for Aunt Zhang to bring the water.

He carried a full basin into his own room and washed his face and his feet, and had just jumped into bed when he thought of something, and dragged out a large chest from under his bed.

He ruffled in it for a few moments and pulled out a gold-thread vest, then his fingers brushed against something hard, and he felt for it curiously and found that it was the little wooden eagle Tingsheng had sent him.

With one hand clutching the vest and the other around the little

eagle, he fell back into bed, his eyes wide with bewilderment, perhaps wondering how the little eagle could have fallen into the bottom of the chest.

He turned over twice in his pillow, but before he could turn a third time, he had already slipped into the sweet world of dreams.

The next day, Mei Changsu got up early but did not leave immediately, instead staying in his room burning incense and playing his zither, and after he had delayed for some time, enough time for Prince Jing to have finished his morning exercises and dealt with his routine military affairs, he finally ordered for his palanquin to be brought and called over to Fei Liu, "let's go."

Although the back walls of the Su Manor and Prince Jing's residence were not far apart, if one were to travel by the main doors, he would have to leave the manor, turn left, walk down a long road, turn right, walk down another long road, turn left again, and walk down yet another long road before seeing the plain but imposing gates of the imperial Jing residence.

Mei Changsu got off his palanquin at the gates of the manor and handed over his notice of visit, and after waiting a little while, a military-looking man came out to lead him inside.

Prince Jing had not personally come out to receive him, but was waiting inside at Huying hall.

Because the notice had mentioned visiting Tingsheng, the child had also been summoned and was standing off to one side.

Having not seen him for some time, Mei Changsu saw that Tingsheng had grown quite a bit taller, his demeanor no longer as frightened or cowed as it had been, and he was dressed in clean cotton robes which, although not luxurious, looked soft and warm.

He did not look very like his father, Prince Qi, but when he smiled, he gave one a feeling of seeing someone familiar.

As soon as Mei Changsu and Fei Liu appeared, Tingsheng started

to smile, but he had always been quiet, and had recently begun to receive rather strict training, and so did not behave as excitably as children usually did, but stood there quietly and waited for Prince Jing and Mei Changsu to finish their polite greetings before stepping forward to bow.

“Tingsheng greets Mister, and Fei Liu gege.”

Prince Jing frowned, as if he did not like to see Tingsheng kneeling to Su Zhe, but remembering that he had been Tingsheng’s benefactor, he did not say anything.

Fei Liu had always been the youngest in the Jiangzuo Alliance, and so was delighted to be called gege, and immediately pulled out the gold-threaded vest and pushed it into Tingsheng’s hands.

“For you!”

Tingsheng only felt something smooth and soft thrust into his hands, and when he held it out, he realized it was a vest, but did not recognize the material it had been made with. However, because it was from Fei Liu, he was very happy, and thanked him with a broad smile.

But although Tingsheng did not know the material, Prince Jing took one look and recognized it for the treasure it was – a prized jianghu gold-threaded vest, which would withstand water and flame, not to mention swords and knives.

His brow immediately furrowed and he said to Mei Changsu, “Gold-threaded garments are very rare, this gift is too precious, Tingsheng cannot accept it.”

“Why are you telling me?”

Mei Changsu gave him an incredulous look in return.

“Fei Liu gave it to him, Your Highness must speak to Fei Liu.”

Prince Jing balked, looking at Fei Liu’s cold expression, and knowing it would be impossible to explain the matter to the youth,

he could only keep silent as he waved Mei Changsu into the hall.

Chapter 49: Confidant

When Mei Changsu left his residence, he had calculated that Prince Jing would have just about finished dealing with his military matters by the time he arrived, but when he entered Huying hall, he saw that it was filled with Prince Jing's most capable subordinates, most of them familiar faces, although there were a few he did not recognize, and all of them renowned and accomplished veterans of his army.

When Prince Jing entered, they all immediately clasped their hands in a salute.

"This is Su Zhe, Mister Su."

Prince Jing introduced him simply, then seemed to think for a moment before adding, "He is my friend...I ask you all to look after him in the future...."

"Yes sir!"

Everyone answered together.

Mei Changsu smiled and bowed slightly in reply.

Friend?

Well, he could only say he was a friend, it was not as if he could announce to his subordinates, "He is my strategist."

"Zhan Ying, I leave you in charge of the rest of the meeting," Prince Jing said to the general standing closest to him, before turning slowly back to Mei Changsu.

"There is a meeting going on, I will accompany Mister Su to the study to talk."

Mei Changsu nodded and the two walked out of the hall side by side onto the green-bricked main path.

For some reason, they both remained silent as they walked, neither inclined to raise some topic to lighten the mood.

Actually, one did not have to pass by Huying hall to reach the study, and Mei Changsu knew that there was another path.

But from the scene in Huying hall, it appeared as if his visitation request had arrived in the middle of their meeting and everyone present had been curious to have a look at this recently famous Su Zhe, and so Prince Jing had obliged by bringing him over on his arrival.

He wondered what impression his sickly appearance had given this group of fierce generals, as most people in the military tended to look down on those too delicate and weak to withstand physical hardship.

That year, when Uncle Nie had first joined the Chiyan Army, hadn't he too been dismissed by himself and Jingyan, until he had won several hard victories in a row for the army?

His gifted strategies had led to numerous victories against their enemies.

This wise soul of the Chiyan Army always seemed to come up with strange and wondrous ways of using their troops, but the last words he had spoken in this world had been uncharacteristically simple.

“Xiao Shu, you must live....”

He had said this as he thrust Lin Shu into the snow pit with all of his strength, a charred column of flame pressing down onto his thin shoulders.

That pair of bright, clear eyes had held only hope, no hatred.

Because, he had only wanted Lin Shu to live, and as for what he would do after he survived, Nie Zhen had held no demands.

But although the dead make no demands, the living cannot forget.

“Is Mister Su feeling unwell?”

Prince Jing's voice drifted over from one side.

"You look very pale."

"It's nothing, it is only that I feel it is even colder today than it was yesterday."

"Of course, today is the winter solstice."

Prince Jing looked as if he had thought of something, and waved a hand to summon a soldier standing guard a good distance away, ordering, "Bring a brazier to my study."

The soldier bowed and left, and Mei Changsu said with a small smile, "Thank you."

"I usually do not keep braziers in my study, and forgot that you become easily cold, and so overlooked this."

Prince Jing's voice was calm.

"I hear you moved into a new residence recently, please accept my congratulations and my apologies for not coming in person to wish you well."

"Did Princess Nihuang mention this to Your Highness?"

"No, it was Jingning."

"Oh," Mei Changsu nodded, as if in sudden understanding.

"No wonder I saw him in Huying hall just now."

Prince Jing quickly turned his head and looked at him.

"What did you say?"

"I mean Guan Zhen, is he now under your command?"

Prince Jing's eyes shone as he stared at Mei Changsu for a long moment, before he let out a breath.

"You even know about this...."

"It was incredibly clever of Princess Jingning to bring Guan Zhen into your command."

Neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu's power is guaranteed, so she could not take the risk.

Not to mention, Guan Zhen is not someone gifted at flattery and politics, and would not be of much use to either of them.

Only here under Your Highness could prestige and honour be gained by strength alone.

But...even if Your Highness took especial care of him, the distance between Guan Zhen and the Princess is too great, and Jingning is already seventeen, and cannot delay for much longer....”

“In a few days, I will send Guan Zhen to the northern mountains to eliminate the bandits and robbers in the area, and he can make his way up the ranks slowly.”

Prince Jing gazed steadily ahead of him.

“Guan Zhen also has a stubborn temper, and with this infatuation, he will not give up until the very last moment.

Who can say whether it was fortunate or unfortunate for Jingning to have come across him?”

Prince Jing's words were a lament rather than a question, and so Mei Changsu did no reply.

After turning a corner, the study came into view, and the brazier had already been brought over, but it had clearly not been there for long and the coldness of the air within the room had not completely dissipated, so Mei Changsu found the chair nearest the brazier and sat down, but when he raised his head, he caught a glimpse of Prince Jing, whose gaze had just flitted across the old chair by the southern window, and a pain rose in his heart.

That was the place he had always used to sit in, but though objects did not change with time, people did, and even if he wanted to sit there now, he feared Jingyan would not allow it.

Once tea had been served and the customary courtesies observed, the conversation immediately turned to the topic at hand.

“Prince Yu hinted that I should find a way to indicate to you, in the matter of the ‘land infringement case’, you can act freely, and do not need to worry about him.”

Prince Jing replied coldly, “I was not planning to worry about him.”

“You received the imperial edict yesterday?”

Mei Changsu continued unconcernedly, his tone still peaceful.

“It has been a day, have you had any thoughts?”

“The evidence the Xuanjing Bureau has brought back is sufficient, and the case is not difficult to judge.”

Prince Jing’s voice was cold and stern.

“The Duke of Qing did not only indulge the practice, he is the main culprit.”

“But he is a first-ranked military official, and has the right to request for pardon.”

“The case involves the murder of three people, he will not be pardoned.”

“He has always been in the capital, and was not personally involved in the murders.”

“The village of the Zhu family, Tu village, have submitted his secret letter as evidence.”

“The secret letter was not in his own handwriting, but rather that of one of the old masters of his household.”

“I invited the old master over last night, and he had already confessed today, he wasn’t very stubborn.”

“Did you really invite him over so politely?”

There was a look of approval in Mei Changsu’s eyes.

“Your Highness was able to ascertain that this old master was the missing piece of the Xuanjing Officer’s evidence, and acted so swiftly and decisively to seize the opportunity – I stand in admiration.”

There was no trace of satisfaction in Prince Jing’s expression.

“It is because the Duke of Qing thought that his secret letter had already been destroyed and did not know it had fallen into the hands of Xia Dong, or he would have long since killed the old master to silence him.”

“But has Your Highness considered that if the Duke of Qing’s case is dealt with severely, in many other areas in which blood has been shed, there will be numerous cases reported in imitation of this one?

Previously, the provincial offices would refuse such cases, but now they would not dare, and do you have confidence in handling the great headache that will arise afterwards?”

“We counter soldiers with arms, and water with earth, is there anything that cannot be handled?”

Mei Changsu had come to visit today originally to encourage Prince Jing not to fear the difficulties ahead, but the way the conversation was going, it seemed that this person still retained his flaw of regarding dangerous terrain as if it were level ground, and so did not need his encouragement.

“Your Highness’ self-confidence is praiseworthy, but there are some aspects worth considering in dealing with the practical matters at hand,”

Mei Changsu urged seriously.

“The great noble houses have always kept apart, and had their own ways of handling matters, but that is because they have never come across a force against which they needed to unite.

If Your Highness could show some subtle variation in the way

you handle these different cases as they arise, and seem to favour some with a lighter sentence while punishing others with a heavier one, then the benefit will be distributed unevenly among the noble houses, and as no clear pattern can be found, they will not be able to form an alliance.

You will be able to halt this trend of land infringement without inciting any great united resistance from the noble houses, and stabilize the peasants' discontent while reducing the number of refugees, and so when everything concludes according to His Majesty's wishes, then he will certainly take notice of your achievement."

Hearing this, Xiao Jingyan looked shaken, and he was silent for a long moment before he said lowly, "Your words are truly inspired.

I had only thought to treat everyone the same, and so perhaps would have not been able to achieve the desired results."

Mei Changsu smiled, and then added, "Since Prince Yu wants to lend you a hand, don't be too aloof, and when you come across claims against his people, you may choose one or two for a lighter sentence, as a show of gratitude."

Prince Jing's thick brow furrowed, and he said wonderingly, "He should be using all of his power to protect the Duke of Qing, why would he take this treasure of his and use it as a gesture of magnanimity to such a piece of rock as me?"

"Because he knows, this time, he cannot change His Majesty's will."

Mei Changsu reached out his hands to the fire on the coals, a faint light shining in his eyes.

"Without the Duke of Qing, and now knowing that Xie Yu has chosen the enemy's camp, he cannot help feeling afraid.

Right now, to him, you are very important."

"In order to showcase my importance, you have gone to such

lengths to remove the Duke of Qing and to expose Xie Yu.”

Prince Yu scoffed.

“I must really thank you.”

“What, Your Highness is not willing to count this service of mine?”

“It is only...I do not want people to think I am with Prince Yu...I do not want to stand beside the Crown Prince or Prince Yu....”

“Though I must cause you this grievance, I guarantee there will not be anything overly unacceptable for you to do.

Besides, you have been suppressed for so many years, people should be able to understand....”

“I do not care about the opinions of people in this world,”

Prince Jing gritted his teeth slightly, his gaze a little unsteady.

“But the dead still have their noble spirits, and I do not want them to see something like this....”

A rush of fiery heat rose up in Mei Changsu’s chest, and it was a long time before he was able to speak again.

“The souls of the departed do not look only at what is on the surface, they will know your heart, not to mention, these are only means to achieve an end.”

“To be honest, I understand.

It is my own choice, and not about feeling wronged or causing grievance.”

Prince Jing took a deep breath.

“I will act according to your arrangements, do not worry.”

Mei Changsu smiled, reassured, and turned to a new topic.

“His Majesty’s will is for Your Highness to choose officials from the Three Departments to aid in the investigation?”

Prince Jing nodded.

“Has Your Highness made your selection?”

“Please advise me,”

Prince Jing answered bluntly.

Mei Changsu took out a folded sheet of paper and handed it to Prince Jing.

Xiao Jingyan opened it and studied its contents for a long while, in deep thought.

“What does Your Highness think about these choices?”

Mei Changsu asked slowly after letting him think quietly for a period of time.

“Very good.”

Prince Jing appraised concisely.

“These people are all worth getting to know well.”

Mei Changsu laughed, “But in the future, they will certainly not become Your Highness’ wingmen.”

Hearing this, Prince Jing did not show any surprise, but rather seemed to agree, indicating that he had already understood the meaning behind Mei Changsu’s words.

“In terms of strategists, Your Highness has me, and that is sufficient; we do not need to worry about the military; in the palace, there is Princess Jingning, and she is not very noticeable and so is an especially strong source of support.

As for the court...I believe Your Highness does not need supporters, because the earlier you gather supporters, the earlier you will be discovered by the Crown Prince and Prince Yu.

What Your Highness needs is nothing more than pure, steadfast ministers.”

Mei Changsu’s tone was low, but his every word was clear.

“The more such ministers there are, the fewer plots and schemes there will be in the court, and the more space Your Highness will have to uphold your true temperament.

Besides, interacting with the people on this list will not make you feel uncomfortable.”

“But these people...it is difficult for any of them to rise in status....”

“Under the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, it may be so, but I hope Your Highness will be able to change these circumstances.

These people do not lack for ability or intelligence, only opportunity.

By their natures, although they would not be willing to attach themselves to any camp or side in the future, they will nonetheless remember kindnesses done to their person.

Your Highness only has to interact with them naturally and genuinely, and if there are any plans we must involve them in, I will handle it.”

“You...”

Prince Jing looked at him dazedly for a long while.

“Is there such a need for you to do something like that?”

Mei Changsu gave a small smile.

“This has always been the role of a strategist.

I would not rest easy if Your Highness had to deal with such matters yourself.”

“I understand....”

Prince Jing seemed to think of something, and said in a low voice, “That day, when you sent a letter asking me to go to Jiyun Tower and sit for half a day, it was because of this....”

“That’s right,” Mei Changsu smiled.

“You two have met already?”

“Yes.

I sat there for a long time, and he was very conspicuous.”

Prince Jing shifted in his chair into a more comfortable position and continued.

“Everyone goes to Jiyun Tower to eat, but he called over the host and asked about the price of every item they sold – wood, rice, oil, salt, meat, vegetables and eggs.

I could hardly fail to notice him.”

“The Ministry of Revenue oversees the national treasury and taxes, which affects people’s livelihood and welfare.

But it has become a giant cesspool under Lou Zhijing, and this person is the only one left who truly cares to investigate the prices of daily necessities, and works solidly and reliably in the department.

If he were not the son of the Duchess of Qinghe, and of high birth, he would have been transferred away long ago.”

Mei Changsu sighed.

“After you met each other that day, did you have an enjoyable conversation?”

“We seemed well-suited to each other.”

Prince Jing looked at him closely.

“Lou Zhijing has been implicated in the murder case, and is unlikely to last much longer as the Minister of Revenue, do you have something planned?”

“What does Your Highness think?”

“Shen Zhui is currently a third-ranked assistant minister, and it would not be impossible for him to be raised by one rank and inherit the title of Minister of Revenue, but he is neither the

Crown Prince's man nor Prince Yu's, you want to push him into this position, is it possible?"

"It is because he is not biased towards either side that this opportunity can fall onto his head."

Mei Changsu's smile was confident.

"Of course, there are many things still that must be done, but there the outcome is relatively sure."

Prince Yu has been waiting for this chance for many years, and he will certainly prevent the Crown Prince from appointing another one of his own people.

As for the Crown Prince, the loss of Lou Zhijing is already a mighty blow, how could he let Prince Yu take this chance to raise someone of his own into the post?

And while these two fight over the seat, the fisherman will reap the benefit."

"Yes, the situation seems to be as such, and with your help in the matter, Shen Zhui is certainly fortunate."

Prince Jing looked up and laughed.

"You truly have unusual methods, and live up to your name of qilin prodigy."

A hint of bitterness arose in Mei Changsu's expression, and he lowered his gaze but made no reply.

Talent?

He was in truth no better than anyone else, it was only that he had put all his thought and effort into this for so many years that he naturally had a much more thorough grasp of the situation.

"But Shen Zhui is truly a breath of fresh air, and it is my wish as well to raise him to this position."

Prince Jing turned his gaze to him and cupped his hands in a

courtesy.

“I am grateful for your consideration of my situation.”

Mei Changsu bowed in return, and said, “Shen Zhui is only the first step, in the coming days, there will be openings also in the Ministries of Appointment and Justice, and those I favour are all on the name list I have given to Your Highness.

I ask Your Highness to take this chance while investigating the case together to make acquaintances of and observe these individuals, and to give them opportunities to showcase their efforts, so that the Emperor will form a good impression of them.

They are all intelligent, and will understand that Your Highness is allocating them this work as an opportunity for promotion in rank without your mentioning it explicitly.”

“Shen Zhui’s opportunity is already rare, how could the Ministry of Appointment and the Ministry of Justice also have openings?”

Prince Jing had just asked this when he suddenly remembered that the source of the Minister of Revenue Lou Zhijing’s topple from power had emerged from the manor that this Su Zhe had so casually bought, and he suddenly understood.

“Nothing will happen in the near future, Your Highness can first take care of the ‘land infringement case’ without worry.”

There was a hint of fierceness in Mei Changsu’s gaze.

“After the new year arrives, I will invite He Jingzhong and Qi Min, as well as their master, to join the game....”

Chapter 50: Dilemma

Such a simple sentence, but because it had come from the mouth of Mei Changsu, it carried a terrifying weight, and was not easily doubted.

Prince Jing gazed at the refined scholar before him, thinking of all the ripples he had caused both openly and secretly since he had entered the capital, and couldn't help letting out a heartfelt sigh.

He wondered why one of the greatest talents in the world, this Mister Mei of Jiangzuo, had chosen himself so resolutely?

Was it really only because of the prestige and respect he could gain from raising a prince currently out of favour to the throne, as he had said before?

“Did Your Highness have a particularly heavy load of military duties today?”

Mei Changsu did not seem to know what he had been thinking, but was drawing his hand into his sleeve as he asked idly.

“It was not early when I came today, but your meeting had not yet finished.”

“The routine matters are easily dealt with, but the meeting took longer today because a rather difficult issue has arisen, and Magistrate Gao of the Capital Magistrate Office came to request my help.”

“Another difficult problem?”

Magistrate Gao's luck this year is really something,”

Mei Changsu couldn't help smiling.

“But this time, it is not a problem that I have given him, so what has happened?”

“It is not anything that requires careful planning, but rather brute force,”

Prince Jing replied.

“A beast has appeared in the mountainous areas of the eastern outskirts, and the villagers were frightened and reported it to the Capital Magistrate Office, but they do not have enough military resources and were not able to capture it, and so came here to me to borrow soldiers.

It is not anything particularly complicated, but we wanted to discuss whether it would be possible to capture the beast alive, to see what kind of a thing it is.”

“It may be the outskirts, but this is still the royal capital, how could there be a beast?

How strange, once Your Highness captures it, don't forget to let me learn something new as well.”

Prince Jing raised an eyebrow.

“I had not thought Mister Su would have such an inquiring spirit....”

“Could it be that, to Your Highness, I only harbour a mind full of dark, dim schemes?”

Mei Changsu teased self-mockingly, and then, feeling his legs growing stiff, he got up and took a few steps to the western window, absently reaching out a hand towards the vermilion iron bow hanging on the wall beside the window.

“Don't touch!”

Prince Jing immediately shouted, and Mei Changsu froze, murmuring to himself for a moment, then slowly lowered his arm and said lowly, without turning his head, “My apologies.”

Prince Jing also felt that he had been discourteous, and explained, a little embarrassed, “That belonged to a late friend, and when he was still living...he did not like strangers touching his belongings....”

Mei Changsu nodded indifferently and did not answer, standing in front of the window for a long moment before saying abruptly that he would be taking his leave.

Prince Jing thought that he had been angered because he would not let him touch the iron bow, and felt a little apologetic.

But it was not possible to apologize, not to mention that Lin Shu's iron bow was not something he could let others touch casually, and so he said nothing, and rose to see him out.

The two walked out of the study side by side, and the atmosphere seemed slightly awkward, with Mei Changsu seemingly not wanting to speak, and Prince Jing not accustomed to creating idle chatter to lighten the mood, and so they walked in silence until they halted together before the arms drilling ground.

In fact, there was another more direct path to the front gates, which was on the other side.

But the two had chosen to walk in the opposite direction with such unspoken agreement because they had both guessed that Fei Liu would certainly be found here.

Prince Jing was a military man, and his imperial residence was different from those of the other princes, its inner courtyard was small and located far to the back, whereas his outer courtyard took up most of the residence, and aside from several arms drilling grounds for the training of soldiers, there was also a training ground for horse riding.

At the moment, the situation in the central training ground could be described as "exciting".

Although Fei Liu was only a bodyguard, his fame in Jinling was equal to that of Mei Changsu, and to some of the military generals, the refined but frail scholar had not aroused their interest nearly as much as this martial arts master with his intriguing skills and tendency to win all his fights.

And so, Tingsheng, who had originally been given the responsibility of hosting Fei Liu, had long since been relegated outside of the small circle that had formed around Fei Liu, which was entirely made up of Prince Jing's generals.

From Fei Liu's expressionless but glowing eyes, he was having quite a lot of fun today.

Back in Jiangzuo Alliance, everyone was always busy, and seldom had there been so many people willing to train with him, not to mention that the martial arts skills of these people were really not bad, and they were all very serious, not teasing him at all!

When Prince Jing arrived, those with sharp eyes had already opened a path through the crowd, and were bowing in greeting.

Prince Jing saw that Mei Changsu did not show any intention of interfering, and so waved a hand and said, "Continue as you were."

Fei Liu's next set of opponents was a pair of twin brothers wielding pikes, not over twenty five or twenty six years of age, who seemed to be military officers by their apparel, and who were both tall and strong.

Their martial dance began fierce and radiant, like the movements of two tigers, and they moved in perfect chemistry with one another.

If they had been on the battlefield, they would surely have made formidable enemies, but unfortunately, against martial arts masters, this set of skills were not enough, and Fei Liu was not someone who would treat one opponent lightly and not another, and so in no time, he had sent one brother flying one way and the second brother another, and his face seemed to draw taut for a moment, likely thinking that this round of opponents had been too weak and not much fun at all.

"Don't step up if you're going to be like those two, let's show His Highness something good!"

After this course shout, a tall, broad figure appeared before Fei Liu, a long-handled curved blade in each hand, giving off an intimidating and formidable air before he had even begun to attack.

“General Qi!

General Qi!”

The crowd immediately began to chant.

Fourth-ranked military official General Qi Meng was one of Prince Jing’s loyal subordinates who had followed him for many years, and was well-respected in his army, so as soon as he appeared, the atmosphere became even more excited, so that even Fei Liu felt that this was no ordinary opponent, and a hint of joy rose in his eyes.

Amidst the loud cries of encouragement, Prince Jing stood steadily with his hands behind his back, his expression indifferent.

This was because he knew that Qi Meng simply was not Fei Liu’s match.

Indeed, at the beginning, because Fei Liu was very interested in those two strange curved blades, he went easy on the first few moves, but after he had gotten a good look, his movements suddenly became much fiercer, and though the foundation of Qi Meng’s martial skills were deep and strong, he was simply no match against this kind of natural prodigious strength.

He took a few steps back, then suddenly twisted the back of his blade, and a bolt shot out from the weapon, flying like a comet straight for Fei Liu.

This move was Qi Meng’s trump card, he had defeated many enemies with it, and it had given him outstanding service.

But Fei Liu didn’t even look alarmed as he stretched out a hand and sent the bolt flying into the trunk of a nearby tree.

Qi Meng's eyes widened in shock and he shouted in surprise before the back of his blade twisted again, and another bolt shot out.

Mei Changsu's expression did not change, but the dark pupils contracted forcefully for a moment.

This was because, this time, the bolt was flying straight for his throat.

If it had been Lin Shu, one flying bolt would not have meant anything, but now, with his entire body weakened to such a state, he would not have been able to beat even the most ordinary of fighters, and so dodging a bolt like this was simply impossible.

Since it was impossible to dodge, then why bother dodging, and so Mei Changsu stood in his original position, unmoving.

Fei Liu's figure had already become like an arrow himself, speeding towards him, but the distance between him and the bolt was too great, and he could not reach it in time.

The razor-sharp bolt was finally caught in the hand of Prince Jing, its edge less than four finger-breadths away from Mei Changsu's neck, but its direction had already changed subtly, and even if Prince Jing had not reacted, it would probably still have only grazed the skin.

Mei Changsu lightly gestured to Fei Liu, and though no one understood what it meant, they saw Fei Liu stop and stand still.

Qi Meng scratched his head and laughed.

"I miscalculated, I miscalculated, you scholarly types aren't used to seeing knives and weapons, eh, did I scare you?"

Mei Changsu's expression was like frost, his gaze falling like ice needles onto Qi Meng's face.

This kind of scene was not rare in armies, and shows of strength were common against newcomers, against outsiders who had been

transferred into the army, or simply against a person you didn't like, and if they performed well in the test, they could gain the beginnings of respect and acknowledgement.

Lin Shu had come across a similar episode before too.

That year, Father had taken a weak, frail scholar in his forties who had been serving in the Ministry of War without any real position, and brought him into the Chiyan Army into an important position, and the young and hot-blooded Young Marshal had purposefully shattered his sword, letting a fragment fly towards that thin figure in order to test his courage.

That time, the rod of Father's punishment had fallen especially heavily, and he had been beaten so badly he could hardly rise out of bed for three days afterwards.

Mei Changsu knew that Prince Jing remembered the incident, and remembered too the words his father had spoken to him in rebuke.

At the scene of the punishment, the target himself, Nie Zhen, had not stepped forward to plead for mercy on his behalf, because he knew that the reason for Lin Shu's harsh punishment was not that he had sought to provoke Nie Zhen, but because, when he had let the fragments of his sword fly at Nie Zhen, His Highness Prince Qi had been standing beside Nie Zhen.

Just as, when the bolt had come flying towards him just now, Prince Jing had been standing beside him.

Although Qi Meng had not harboured any malicious intent, although his target had certainly not been Prince Jing, he had nevertheless turned the blade of his weapon in the direction of his own lord.

If Prince Jing only sought to maintain his current position, if he were to become merely a great military general in the future, then the scene could end in laughter.

But now, the situation was changing.

Once his heart and ambition turned towards the most respected and honoured seat in Da Liang, he must begin to purposefully nurture the kind of air befitting a sovereign, and it must be an air that could never be ignored or offended in any way.

Seeing the iron-like expression on Prince Jing's face, the laughing Qi Meng felt more and more uneasy, and as fear began to grow in his heart, his gaze turned inadvertently towards his left.

All of Prince Jing's generals of relatively high rank stood gathered there, and their expressions were nervous, one of them gesturing for Qi Meng to kneel.

"I was impulsive and reckless, and have offended the gentleman, pray overlook my coarse manners."

Qi Meng thought that Prince Jing was angry because he had acted discourteously against his favoured Su Zhe, and so immediately bowed and apologized to Mei Changsu.

"You do not need to apologize to me," Mei Changsu smiled coldly, his words falling like poisoned arrows.

"In any case, it is Prince Jing who has lost face here, not I."

He did not pay any notice to the ripples his words had raised, but turned his cool gaze from Qi Meng to Prince Jing.

"I have always admired Prince Jing's elegant and graceful governing of his army, and never could have thought that I would be so disappointed upon seeing them for myself today.

A mob with no respect for the law and order of their lord – it is small wonder that they have not gained the favour of His Majesty.

Daring to fire weapons at Your Highness Prince Jing – what kind of rules are in place here?

I can only imagine that the respect and obedience Your Highness commands from your subordinates still cannot compare to a mere

jianghu chief like myself.

My eyes have truly been opened today.....I will take my leave now, farewell!”

Before he had even finished half of his speech, a cold sweat had broken out over Qi Meng’s forehead, and he fell forward in a kneel.

Prince Jing looked at him coldly, not saying a word, his face dark, and everyone around him kept silent in fear, slowly all dropping to their knees as well, and even Tingsheng, who did not really understand what was going on, was frightened by the solemn atmosphere and followed their example.

And so, when Mei Changsu led Fei Liu out of the manor amidst the terrified silence, no one dared to stop him.

This was because everyone knew, although Su Zhe’s words had been harsh, not a single word had been false.

Although in terms of comparing martial ability, this kind of testing of outsiders was commonplace, whether Prince Jing was present or not made all the difference.

“Your Highness,”

in the end, it was the young general Zhan Ying, the highest ranked of Prince Jing’s army, who spoke up lowly.

“Your subordinates know we have done wrong, pray Your Highness have mercy, we will accept our punishment.”

Qi Meng thrust his head down in a bow and said in a trembling voice, “Pray Your Highness name my punishment.”

Prince Jing’s gaze swept coldly over the kneeling soldiers, all of whom had lowered their heads to avoid his gaze, and finally returned to Qi Meng.

Mei Changsu had used the sharpest words to leave him this formidable task: the strengthening of the interior of the imperial Jing household.

Since he had chosen to embark on the quest for the throne, there were more changes that could occur at a moment's notice than anyone could imagine, and while he used the 'land infringement' case to capitalize on other advantages, at the same time, he would have to find a way to reforge the entire imperial Jing household into a piece of solid iron.

For the first time, Prince Jing felt the heaviness of the weight on his shoulders, but because of it, he also stood straighter.

“Qi Meng behaved rashly, without the manners and courtesy due to his superiors, and is sentenced to two hundred strokes of the rod and demoted to the rank of centurion.

Zhan Ying, you will oversee the punishment.”

With these words, Prince Jing turned and strode away, leaving behind the crowd standing at a loss on the training grounds.

Chapter 51: Land Infringement Case

With the passing of the winter solstice, the year was drawing to an end.

It should have been a time of casting aside the old and welcoming the new, a time of joy and excitement, but the atmosphere in the capital had become unexpectedly tense as a result of one of the Emperor's imperial edicts.

“By royal decree, the investigation of the Bin province land infringement case will now begin, led by Prince Jing Xiao Jingyan as principal investigator, and aided by the Three Departments.

You are hereby ordered to investigate and sentence all involved without prejudice or personal bias.”

The day after he had personally received the bright yellow silk scroll of the imperial decree from the hands of the imperial eunuch, Xiao Jingyan announced the name list of the officials of the Three Departments who would be aiding in the investigation, which immediately shook the already shaken court.

If Prince Jing being named the principal investigator in this case had reduced the Duke of Qing's chances of escaping blame in this case to an infinitesimal amount, then this name list of the assisting officials had decidedly thrust him into hell.

Although, among the officials of the court, some stood on the sidelines, some had their own biases, and some tried to please both sides, anyone who had been able to rise up in the ranks of the court had some measure of intelligence, and everyone had a good idea of whom those Prince Jing had chosen claimed as their lord.

It quickly became agreed among the court that the Duke of Qing would not be able to avoid calamity this time.

Not only did his close friends and relatives not even dare try to help him, even the person who had publicly acknowledge him as a

pillar of support, Prince Yu Xiao Jinghuan, was behaving very strangely.

The Ministry of Justice was Prince Yu's territory, and the majority of Prince Jing's investigation would be taking place there, and so everyone thought he would certainly come across some difficulties, and did not expect Prince Yu to accommodate him so amiably, without the slightest sign of intending to make any trouble at all, even sternly rebuking anyone who accidentally delayed in responding to his requests.

So the already precarious position of the Duke of Qing was thus confirmed, and the only uncertainty now lay in whether the Emperor would spare his life, and as for his glorious first-ranked military official position, that was lost for certain.

After ten days, the land infringement case had still yet to be concluded, but news was starting to spread.

Similar cases started flooding into the capital, and some of the implicated noble houses had begun quietly returning land to their peasant owners with compensation, even occasionally coercing them to keep quiet.

In the handling of the subsequent matters, Prince Jing showed a heretofore unseen level of capability, with a nimble flexibility in addition to his steady, unwavering determination, and worked beautifully in cooperation with the officials assisting in the investigation.

And so, because of the Emperor's support, Prince Yu's accommodation, and the reliability of his assistants, a case that could have caused uproar and chaos was handled so cleanly under Prince Jing's direction that he won the praise of everyone who heard about it.

Less than a month later, the case had been essentially concluded, and the number of the convicted among the Duke of Qing and his relatives and close friends came to seventeen in total, and they

were sentenced to imprisonment pending execution, with all their property seized, the males of their households sent away to serve penal sentences, and the females sent to service in the palace.

After he had sealed the final scroll, Prince Jing led the rest of the investigating officials into the palace to see the Emperor.

The Emperor immediately summoned them into Xianan hall.

After entering the doors of the hall, Prince Jing discovered that Prince Yu was already before the Emperor, and did not seem to have just arrived.

“Yan’er, you have completed your task.”

The Emperor inquired.

“Your son has obeyed my father’s will, and has completed the sentencing of the Duke of Qing and his relatives for the crime of land infringement, and of one murder.

Here is the scroll, for Father’s reference.”

The Emperor took the scroll the eunuch passed up and read it once from beginning to end, gave an indifferent “Ng” before passing the scroll to Prince Yu, then turned his gaze to the figures gathered before the throne and asked, “Who was responsible for the writing of the case?”

Prince Jing replied, “Cai Quan, senior minister of the Ministry of Justice,” and gestured for Cai Quan to step forward.

“It was well-written.

The structure was clearly organized, and the words carried good substance.”

The Emperor looked over Cai Quan, then turned his gaze back to Prince Jing and was silent for a while before he said, “Your work was not bad as well, you must handle the final matters properly, and continue to stabilize the situation.”

“Yes, Father.”

Prince Yu cut in with a smile, "This case was indeed handled beautifully, and Father has truly chosen the right person for the job.

Such an important case, it was fortunate that Jingyan was in charge, if it was someone else, I fear they would still be running in circles."

The Emperor looked at him warmly and a smile spread across his face.

"You have behaved very well this time as well, and lightened a great deal of our burden.

Among all our princes, you are the most earnest with the best grasp of the bigger picture.

We hear you even voluntarily helped Jingyan take care of certain matters, is this true?"

"I feared that Jingyan might not be too familiar with the Ministry of Justice, since he seldom has cause to come there, and so lent him a hand."

Prince Yu smiled and waved a hand dismissively.

"That was very considerate, we are pleased.

Here...."

The Emperor raised a hand slightly and beckoned a servant over.

"Bring a gold chain and four bolts of satin, and bestow them upon Prince Yu."

"Your son thanks my father for his great favour."

Prince Jing had investigated the case so diligently and had concluded it so quickly and beautifully, and only received a few lukewarm phrases of praise, while Prince Yu had only held back from causing trouble, but received such generous gifts.

The officials of the Three Departments who had accompanied

Prince Jing saw all of this, and though they said nothing, they felt great indignation rising in their hearts.

Before the Emperor's bias and Prince Yu's self-satisfied sympathy, Prince Jing himself felt nothing.

He had long ago grown used to receiving unfair treatment and being wronged, and the Emperor's blind favouritism no longer caused the slightest dismay in him, but rather further ignited the flame of his fighting spirit.

After retreating from Xianan hall, Prince Jing and the other officials went their own way, but Prince Yu rushed out from the hall and called after them, "Jingyan, wait."

Before, he would have pretended not to hear and kept walking, but to Xiao Jingyan now, his own likes and dislikes no longer meant anything to him, and so he halted and calmly turned around.

Prince Yu hurried towards him, a friendly smile on his face, and gripped Prince Jing's hand as he explained, "Don't be angry, Father is really very pleased with the way you have handled the case, and he is planning to wait until you have concluded everything before bestowing rewards..."

I have reaped rewards without doing any work today, and have stolen your glory, and if you don't mind, I will have the gold chain and the bolts of satin sent to your manor...."

"My royal brother is too courteous.

I am a military man, and have no use for such things."

"It is not for you, it is most appropriate for your wives...."

Prince Jing raised an eyebrow and said indifferently, "My royal brother is not aware that I only have an imperial concubine?"

By the rules of the palace, she is not entitled to the use of such things, but I thank you for the kindness."

Prince Yu looked taken aback, and though he was usually the most adept at pretty words and empty compliments, he could find nothing to say at this moment.

According to proper etiquette, Prince Jing was only a prince, not a royal prince, and so the rank of his imperial concubine was too low to wear gold jewelry or imperial satin.

But these rules were not strictly enforced, and to say nothing of imperial concubines, even the wives of marquis sometimes wore gold jewelry before the Emperor, and the Emperor pretended not to notice, and never pressed the matter.

It was only Prince Jing's rigid temperament that led to him keeping to this rule, but he could not say he was wrong, and so could only laugh in embarrassment and say, "I overlooked the matter.

But by your abilities, it is only a matter of time before you are raised to Royal Prince, there's nothing hindering you... that's right, the new year is coming soon, I will be having a banquet on the fifth day of the new year, Jingyan, you must come, you never came before..."

Prince Jing thought, you never invited me before.

But of course, he understood that Prince Yu's invitation was to show everyone the friendly relations that had developed between the two, and so did not make things difficult for him, but nodded slightly and replied, "I should come to bring my good wishes to my royal brother and sister-in-law."

Prince Yu saw that, though his expression was still cool, he had seemed to give a favourable reply, and it seemed that his recent efforts had made some progress, and so joy arose in his heart and he was about to speak again when one of the female servants of the Empress came to summon him immediately to Zhengyang palace, and so he could only say briefly, "Don't hesitate to find me if you encounter any difficulties" before leaving hurriedly.

Xiao Jingyan had remained rather cold towards all of Prince Yu's warm efforts, and had not seemed to reply very enthusiastically, giving off only a slight hint of leaning towards him.

But because he normally gave off such a cold, rigid impression, this slight hint of bias was enough to create all kinds of speculation.

The Crown Prince saw that, after he had so easily gotten rid of the Duke of Qing, an even more powerful Prince Jing had appeared, and was growing extremely frustrated.

But Xie Yu kept his composure, and though he received several pointed barbs from Prince Yu in the court, he did not rise to the bait.

Besides the 'land infringement case', the other two great cases that had commanded the attention of the court also had their own developments.

These two cases had been delivered to the Ministry of Justice from the Capital Magistrate Office virtually on the same day, but the Ministry of Justice had used different methods in handling them.

The corpses in the well case had been dealt with in the fiercest manner, and no stone was left unturned in the investigation as evidence was collected, witnesses interrogated, and the case sentenced.

Permission to pass sentence on a minister of the same rank was obtained, and though Lou Zhijing refused to admit his guilt, the weight of the evidence was against him and he was stripped of his position and imprisoned, and as soon as the Emperor issued the edict, this once mighty Minister of Revenue would become a concern of the past.

As for He Wenxin's murder case, although the evidence was clear, it was left to stagnate, and whenever the Earl of Wen came to

complain, Qi Min would bring out a long list of doubts and hesitations, and reply that the investigation was still pending, and gradually seemed to be edging towards a sentence of manslaughter, which incensed the Earl of Wen so much that he could no longer rise from his bed.

In any case, the winds of fate seemed to be blowing in favour of Prince Yu as the year drew to a close, and he was beside himself with joy.

And the person who woke him from his pleasant daydreams like a bucket of cold water thrown over his head was the talent of Crimson Sleeve House, Qin Banruo.

Chapter 52: Witness

Of the three pleasures houses on Spiral Market Street, Miaoyin House and Willow House had longer histories, but the fame and reputation of the newer Crimson Sleeve House was spreading quickly.

This was because the music of Miaoyin House and the dances of Willow House appealed to those with specific tastes, but Crimson Sleeve House's selling point – beauty – was of a rather more universal appeal.

In this world, there may be men who do not appreciate music or dance, but there are none who do not appreciate beautiful women.

The ladies of Crimson Sleeve House had always been famed for their beauty, and if you grabbed one at random, even if she could not sing or dance or recite poetry or draw or debate or converse with particular intelligence, at the very least, she would certainly be beautiful.

Beautiful, gentle, and never putting on airs – these were the characteristics of the ladies of Crimson Sleeve House.

If Miaoyin House's Miss Gong Yu had shut the door in your face, or if you didn't want to wait in line at Willow House for the privilege of a day in the company of the ladies Xinyang and Xinliu, then you could come to Crimson Sleeve House for consolation.

The ladies here did not put on strange, arrogant airs, and never put any guest out of their door, so long as you could pay, of course.

Beautiful ladies are naturally expensive – and the more beautiful, the more expensive.

But Jinling has never lacked for those with more money than they knew how to spend.

The mysterious and beautiful Qin Banruo, one of the most trusted and reliable members of Prince Yu's household, was the

owner of Crimson Sleeve House.

But she herself was not involved in the affairs that went on in Crimson Sleeve House, and only served as its owner.

Although she too had beauty enough to break any man's heart, Qin Banruo had never openly shown her face at Crimson Sleeve House, and no more than three people in Jinling knew that she was in fact the true owner of this entertainment house.

Aside from the money that rolled in, the Crimson Sleeve House brought Qin Banruo another rich source of income – intelligence.

People were always at their most relaxed when enjoying entertainments of this sort, and their tongues were naturally loose as well, and so with a little bit of skill, many things could be learned in these moments.

The ladies of Crimson House had all been specially trained, and had been taught how to coax their guests into sharing all manners of secrets, which they then wrote out from memory and reported once a day.

The majority of Qin Banruo's time was spent in going through these unfiltered reports, over a hundred each day, and sifting out those of use and then focusing on them for further investigation.

But this was not Qin Banruo's only source of information.

Aside from those working in the entertainment industry, Qin Banruo had also specially trained a group of clever young girls and found ways to wed them into the households of court officials, as a source of fresh intelligence regarding persons in the court.

To Prince Yu, the importance of this gorgeous, cunning lady was not inferior to that of any one of the strategists of his household, and of course, he wished in his heart that, in the not too distant future, this beautiful lady could become more than just his strategist.

This time, Qin Banruo had discovered the problem from one of

her routine reports.

One of the guests had been teasing one of the ladies when he said casually, “The purpose of coming out to places like this is to enjoy oneself, and if one lady is occupied, then we can find another, there is no need to become so fixed on one apple on the tree.

Look at that He Wenxin, getting into a fight over a girl, what is he pretending at?

Even Miss Xinliu is not worth the price of his life, and he actually thought he could escape a death sentence because of his father, what arrogance....”

Qin Banruo had instantly been alerted by his words and so had immediately sent someone to investigate this guest, and had found out that he was a senior historian from the household of the Emperor’s imperial brother, Prince Ji, and was well-known for his lecherous ways; he had been at Willow House on the day of the crime, though he had not been at the actual scene.

Qin Banruo’s suspicions had not been put to rest by this, and so she had sent more people over to inquire, and had ended up discovering a frightening fact.

From the information that she had gathered, Qin Banruo realized the gravity of the situation and so immediately went to see Prince Yu.

“You say the Earl of Wen has an important witness within his grasp, and has not used him yet only because he is waiting to see how the Ministry of Justice will proceed?”

After hearing only a few words, Prince Yu had raised an eyebrow.

“How has he resisted for so long?”

“Because the Earl of Wen has lost all faith in the Ministry of Justice.”

Qin Banruo spoke confidently.

“From the current situation, the case does not lack for witnesses, and if the Ministry of Justice had even the slightest intention to judge the case fairly, it does not need one more witness to pass the sentence, but if the Ministry of Justice wants to acquit He Wenxin, then even if the Earl of Wen revealed this one witness, it would not change anything, but would rather allow the Ministry of Justice time to prepare a defense.”

Prince Yu nodded slowly.

“I see, your meaning is, the Earl of Wen is waiting for the Ministry of Justice to conclude the case, and then, if the outcome is not to his satisfaction, he will bring this witness directly to the Emperor and claim the case was handled wrongly?”

“Yes.”

“Would the Emperor believe it?”

Prince Yu laughed coldly.

“The Earl of Wen thinks the situation is simple, why have you let him convince you as well?”

The Ministry of Justice’s conclusion will not overlook any detail, so what would be the use of the Earl of Wen dragging one more person before the Emperor?”

Qin Banruo’s delicate brows furrowed.

“If it were anyone else, it would be of no use.

But the Emperor will listen to this witness.”

Prince Yu saw her solemn expression, and couldn’t help being startled into silence.

“Please forgive Banruo for neglecting her duty, the situation on that day was chaotic, and the witnesses were many, and though I put all my efforts into the investigation, I have overlooked the fact that the Capital Magistrate Office omitted one person when summoning all the eyewitnesses for questioning....”

Qin Banruo's mouth twisted, a small dimple appearing in her cheek, lending her serious expression a hint of charm.

"Afterwards, one of the senior historians of Prince Ji's household was overheard at Crimson Sleeve House making suspicious comments, and so I investigated the matter anew, and discovered that it was not that Capital Magistrate Gao Sheng had made an error and overlooked this person, but that he simply could not summon this person...."

"You keep speaking in circles, who is this witness?"

"Prince Ji."

Prince Yu jumped in fear.

"Uncle Prince Ji?"

"Yes, there were two guests in the building where the crime took place, and one of them was Prince Ji.

He probably...saw the events unfold with his own eyes...."

"Aiya, that makes things difficult!"

Dark clouds seemed to be forming over Prince Yu's head.

"Although Prince Ji stays away from palace affairs, only caring about poetry and music and the like, he has an honest character, and if the Earl of Wen asks, he will certainly speak the truth before the Emperor...."

"That's right.

Perhaps he felt there were already many witnesses and he would not need to step up himself, and so for this reason took his wives with him away to his manor near the hot springs the day after the crime took place.

He does not know about the situation with the handling of the case, and has not raised any fuss, and therefore led to our failing to realize that he has been one of the witnesses all along."

“Ai...”

Prince Yu leaned over the table, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers, his expression troubled.

“Uncle Prince Ji is no easy enemy, and I cannot come to conflict with him over a court official’s son.

If the Earl of Wen has truly convinced him to speak to the Emperor, nothing good will come out of it for the Ministry of Justice.

It seems...He Wenxin cannot be saved....”

“I have come to the same conclusion, no matter what, we cannot save a little to lose much more.”

Because she did not harbour any good feelings towards the spoiled, malicious He Wenxin, Qin Banruo did not feel that this was any great loss.

“Even if Minister He is useful, this is merely something his own son has brought upon himself, he cannot expect Your Highness to save him at any cost.

If he collapses over the death of a son, then he is not worth the regard Your Highness has given him.”

Prince Yu looked at her and sighed.

“I understand what you mean, but He Jingzhong is really still of some use, and this son of his is his pride and joy – it is his only son, what family would not be the same?

Of course, you are right as well, what cannot be protected must be sacrificed.

I will speak to Qi Min, and tell him to subtly sound out Prince Ji, and if Uncle’s attitude is firm, then he should not force the matter.

Since there is no way out, then we must pay for a life with a life.”

“Your Highness is wise.”

A smile spread across Qin Banruo's delicate features.

Prince Yu reached out and grasped the beautiful arm, saying softly, "I am fortunate to have you, nothing escapes your wise gaze.

Not long ago, you discovered Xie Yu's true allegiance, and today, you have stopped the Ministry of Justice from falling into this trap, how shall I reward you for such outstanding work?"

Qin Banruo's brow flickered and she gently took a step back, drawing her jade-like arm out from Prince Yu's hand, and then let her fingertips trail across his chest gently, seeming both intentional and casual at once, and replied with a proud smile, "Banruo is a woman, but has always been interested in the romance and wonders of the rise and fall of rulers and lords; however, as I was born a girl, my talent and position are limited, and I cannot enter the picture myself in this lifetime.

Now, under Your Highness' grace and kindness, I can do my part for the future ruler of our kingdom, so my wish has already been fulfilled, and I dare not ask for any more reward."

"If I ascend to the throne in the future, you will be my most senior minister, and even half of the royal bed can be yours, there is nothing I will not give you."

A hint of teasing crept into Prince Yu's tone.

"I only fear that you would not like it, who can tell?"

Qin Banruo gave a small smile, and was not angered, but also did not continue the conversation, instead bowed and said quietly, "Regarding the matter of Prince Ji, it would be best if Your Highness spoke to Minister Qi soon.

Banruo has matters still to deal with back at the house, so I will take my leave."

The way she kept him at a distance increased the itch in Prince Yu's heart, and he longed for her tender affection, but he also truly

treasured this girl, and so did not want to act rashly, so he only coughed, forcefully suppressing the wild desire in his heart as he watched her leave with glowing eyes.

Very quickly, the Minister of Justice, Qi Min, received the news from the imperial Yu residence.

Originally, he had been discussing with his assistants how best to bribe the witnesses, reword their oral confessions, and alter the appearance of the corpse.... Their work had been almost completed when it was suddenly halted as if a pot of cold water had been thrown over them.

As soon as he heard that Prince Ji was an eyewitness, Qi Min's head seemed to double in size.

Although Prince Yu had meant for him to first try to explore Prince Ji's stance, Qi Min knew what the stance would be whether he explored it or not.

Prince Ji's frank and straightforward manner was well-known, and even if he wasn't so straightforward, he still could not perjure himself for the sake of a murderer.

Even if the Earl of Wen did not ask anything of him, once the Emperor questioned him, he must speak the truth.

But since Prince Yu had ordered him to explore, then it would not be good for him to not even make an attempt, and so Qi Min took two days of leave and prepared to make a personal visit to Prince Ji's hillside manor near the hot springs.

Even before he left, Qi Min had already prepared himself for the possibility that he would be making this trip in vain.

But he had never thought that this conclusion would be made so early and so quickly.

The reason for the Minister of Justice's fruitless return was not Prince Ji's stubborn words; to tell the truth, at the moment Qi Min knew that he had made the journey in vain, he had not even seen

Prince Ji yet.

The situation was not complicated, but was quite coincidental.

Huqiu was the holy land of hot springs, and was located deep in the forests of the mountain, and among them, Prince Ji's courtyard was the largest and the most comfortable.

Anyone who was friendly with Prince Ji would choose to stay at his courtyard when they came to Huqiu.

Such as Yan Yujin, who had forged a long and deep friendship with Prince Ji due to their shared appreciation for the romantic and tendency to lead carefree lifestyles.

When the cheerful young master of the Imperial Uncle's household, the rather depressed first young master of the imperial Ning residence, and the somewhat dismayed second young master of the imperial Ning residence gathered outside his courtyard requesting to visit, Prince Ji immediately and joyfully invited them in.

Though they were of different generations and there was a large gap in their ages, Prince Ji, a born romantic, had kept the confident ease of his youth and so maintained a pleasant relationship with the younger generation, and it was as if there was no distance at all between them.

With the arrival of such vibrant guests, one of them being his favourite little Yujin, Prince Ji was delighted, and entertained his guests with wine and laughter, and when everyone was high in spirits from the drink, naturally there was nothing they did not talk about.

The first topic of conversation fell to the fragrant, powdered faces of the opposite sex.

When it came to judging the beauties of the capital, Prince Ji's insight was on par with that of the master of Langya Hall, and he became increasingly animated as the conversation went on.

Yan Yujin also harboured a deep appreciation for the fairer sex, and the lady he admired most was Gong Yu of Miaoyin House, and so as the two talked happily, the conversation turned gradually from Miaoyin House, to Willow House, and then to the murder that had taken place at the latter.

Prince Ji slurred, “I know, I was...was...there....”

Yan Yujin’s eyes widened.

“You...you were there? What...what happened?”

Although Prince Ji’s tongue was slurring, his mind was still clear, and not only clear, but aroused, and so when Yan Yujin asked, he immediately began vividly recounting the entire story from beginning to end.

The other two members of his audience didn’t make much difference, but Yan Yujin was a person who made friends easily and loved to gossip, and so the next day, when he went out to visit the other noble courtyards of Huqiu, he inadvertently began spreading Prince Ji’s eyewitness account of the murder case.

And so, when Qi Min arrived at Huqiu, practically all the nobles who had come there for a respite from the capital knew that He Wenxin had committed murder and that Prince Ji had seen the whole thing with his own eyes.

Under these circumstances, further exploring Prince Ji’s stance had become completely meaningless, and the Minister of Justice could only sigh in his heart: Oh Minister He, it is not that I have not tried my best to help you, it is only that your son...has truly terrible luck....

Chapter 53: Sacrificial Rites

According to the laws of Da Liang, criminals on death row were only executed at spring and autumn of each year, known as the 'Spring Execution' and the 'Autumn Execution' respectively.

Once He Jingzhong realized that his son could not hope to escape from blame and would undoubtedly be sentenced to death, he switched to pleading for Qi Min to delay the passing of the sentence to after the Spring Execution, to buy more time for his son in the hopes that some opportunity might arise in the future.

Unfortunately, the Earl of Wen saw right through him, and with a powerful witness in his grasp and the mood of the capital on his side, his attitude hardened, and he lingered in the Ministry of Justice day and night, demanding for the case to be sentenced.

The Crown Prince had just lost the Ministry of Revenue, Lou Zhijing, and so he was definitely going to make the most of this opportunity for revenge, and began prompting his subordinates to accuse Qi Min of misconduct and neglecting his duty, claiming that he was purposefully refusing to investigate this case.

After a few days of this, the Ministry of Justice was finding the situation difficult to handle, and as Prince Yu also felt that, since the death penalty was unavoidable, dying half a year earlier or later didn't make much difference, he quietly signaled Qi Min, and within a few days, the case was opened, witnesses and evidence were gathered, and He Wenxin was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death by beheading.

The day after the case was sentenced, He Jingzhong collapsed ill in bed, and the imperial physician diagnosed him with disturbed consciousness and discord of the vital energy, and advised him rest and quiet.

It was now the end of the year, and the time had come for the Ministry of Appointments to arrange for the evaluation of all court

officials to determine the following year's promotions and demotions.

Officials also tended to send new year gifts to the court, and even reserve officials were allowed to move about openly during this time, and so took advantage of the holiday to forge new relationships or strengthen old ones, in the name of bringing new years' wishes to one another.

So no matter how you looked at it, this was the busiest time of year for the Ministry of Appointments, and He Jingzhong's sudden illness was leading to confusion and chaos.

Just as much of the Crown Prince's secret income had come from the Ministry of Revenue, most of Prince Yu's extra profit came from the Ministry of Appointment's power over promotions and dismissals, and the flow of money that always came pouring in at this time of year could not afford to be disrupted because of the Minister of Appointment's sickness.

But some things couldn't be hurried, and He Jingzhong had indeed been severely shaken by his son's sentencing and was not faking his illness, and so neither pleading nor scolding would be of any use in getting him out of bed.

Prince Yu saw that the situation was becoming more and more desperate, and was forced to call a meeting of his most cunning strategists to discuss how to solve this problem.

Two days later, Prince Yu personally visited He Jingzhong's residence, dismissed everyone from his presence, and spent some time warmly comforting this subordinate of his.

How exactly he comforted him, no one knew.

They only knew that, a few days later, He Jingzhong seemed to have recovered and had returned anew to his court duties, easily resolving the confusion and chaos that had arisen in his absence, and busied himself every day handling the yearly evaluations and

seeing external officials, often working late into the night, as if he was giving his life to the service of his lord, as if his grief was giving him energy.

The Crown Prince, looking on from the side, couldn't understand what was going on.

But the Crown Prince wasn't really in the mood to pay much attention to He Jingzhong just then, because all his time was being spent on another matter, which was also a matter that was currently troubling the Ministry of Rites.

At the end of the year, the most important task for the royal family were the sacrificial rites – sacrifices to the ancestors, sacrifices to the nation, and sacrifices to the gods.

To the court and to the imperial family, whether the rites were performed correctly determined whether the following year would bring fortune or calamity, and so not even the slightest mistake could be made in the ceremony.

It was then that Xie Yu keenly recognized that an opportunity of great benefit to the Crown Prince had arisen.

According to the rites of Da Liang, those of the Inner Palace below the rank of consort could not participate in the rites, and could only kneel in a circle outside the ceremony.

But according to those same rites, after the Crown Prince had sprinkled the ceremonial wine, he had to kneel and touch the robes of his father and mother, to express filial piety.

Here lay the contradiction.

The lady Yue had been demoted to concubine, but she was also the Crown Prince's birth mother; on the one hand, her rank was very low, but on the other hand, it was also very honourable, and this dilemma was making the Ministry of Rites' job very difficult.

Xie Yu secretly suggested for the Crown Prince to take advantage of this opportunity to weep and repent before the Emperor and beg

him to restore his mother's rank, so that even if she couldn't be restored to Noble Consort all at once, at least she could resume a prominent position in the palace, and regain the right to her own residence as well as the honour of keeping the Emperor company through the night, and then she could slowly begin to regain the Emperor's favour.

The Crown Prince was delighted with this idea and, after some careful preparation, ran to kneel before the Emperor and wept for two whole hours, trying his best to show himself as obedient and pious.

The Emperor was finding the situation difficult.

Lady Yue had always been his favourite in the Inner Palace, and it was not that he did not want to take this chance to pardon her.

But she had only been punished a few months ago, and if he pardoned her so soon, he was afraid Princess Nihuang would be bitterly disappointed.

“Father, I will apologize to the Princess personally, and compensate her well.”

The Crown Prince had been carefully instructed and so knew why the Emperor was hesitating, and immediately wrapped his arms around his leg, saying, “The Princess is dutiful and principled, she will definitely understand that this is all for the year end's ceremonies.

I am willing to be punished before the Princess, to atone for my mother's sins.”

The Emperor's heart was stirred by his weeping, and he sent a summons to the Minister of Rites, Chen Yuancheng.

This Old Minister Chen had been in the court since the reign of the previous Emperor, and was known for never listening to or relying on anyone else, only trusting in the rites, and even the greatest of quarrels between the Crown Prince and Prince Yu could

not shake his resolve by an inch.

It was because the Ministry of Rites was under the iron thumb of this old minister that it had succeeded in becoming the only one of the six departments that had not succumbed to either camp, and still maintained a strictly neutral position.

Old Minister Chen did not know why Consort Yue had been dismissed, and from the edict, he had believed it related to some internal conflicts of the Inner Palace.

He had just been troubling over how to arrange the sacrificial rites, and so when the Emperor inquired as to whether he thought Lady Yue's rank ought to be restored, he of course did not object.

But although the Ministry of Rites had not objected and had actually agreed enthusiastically, the Emperor still hesitated.

At this moment, Xie Yu coincidentally arrived to request an audience, in order to submit a report on the troops in the north-west.

The Emperor did not know about the relationship between Xie Yu and the Crown Prince, and thinking that he was a neutral military official, he summoned him into the hall and asked his opinion on whether Lady Yue ought to be restored to her original rank.

Xie Yu thought it over for a moment, then answered, "Your servant believes the Crown Prince is virtuous, and the lady Yue diligent in her service to the palace, serving Your Majesty loyally in the Inner Palace for these many years without ever neglecting her duty, and so demoting her from a first-ranked noble consort to concubine for the reason of "giving disrespectful service" was too harsh of a punishment.

I had some reservations at the time, but as this was a matter of Your Majesty's imperial household, no one dared to comment.

Now, since Your Majesty's honoured heart has changed and is

inclined to show mercy, then it is simply a matter of issuing the imperial decree, what difficulty remains?”

“Ai, you do not know.”

The Emperor seemed slightly embarrassed.

“The lady Yue’s punishment was for another reason....for the sake of the Crown Prince, she behaved immorally towards Nihuang in the palace itself, and we fear that if she is so lightly pardoned, it would offend the hearts of the soldiers of the Southern border...”

Xie Yu lowered his head and looked to be in deep thought, then slowly walked forward and said in a low voice, “If this is the reason, then your servant believes...there is even more reason to issue the pardon....”

The Emperor was taken aback.

“What do you mean?”

“Pray the Emperor consider carefully, the lady Yue was an imperial Noble Consort, and the birth mother of the Crown Prince, so she is the lord; Princess Nihuang is the daughter of a lord and a military official of the court, so she is the servant.

If the servant harbours anger in her heart over the momentary confusion of her betters, then she has violated the morality and principles due to her position as servant.

Although the Princess is a skilled fighter and has received heavy imperial favour, Your Majesty has already openly demoted an imperial consort and punished the Crown Prince for her sake, and this already counts as an act of exceedingly great mercy.

If the Princess were an earnest servant, she should have pleaded for mercy on behalf of the lady Yue at that time.

Of course...young ladies have this kind of temper, and are sometimes thoughtless and inconsiderate, so we will not say any

more.

But the year end's rituals are important ceremonies with national implications, and restoring the lady Yue's rank is an act of maintaining the tranquility of the kingdom and the happiness of the common people, so the balance between the two sides of consideration is very clear.

We have only to dispatch a messenger to the imperial Mu residence to give a simple explanation.

Besides, too much imperial favour may encourage arrogance.”

Xie Yu gave a meaningful smile.

“Your servant is a military man, and so naturally knows that, when dealing with those among the military who rely on the glory of their achievements to defy their lord, it is best for Your Majesty to purposefully suppress them a little from time to time.”

The Emperor's brow wrinkled, but he did not seem to catch the hint, and only scoffed, “Nihuang is not this kind of person, you have thought too much.”

Xie Yu hurriedly and fearfully apologized, saying, “Your servant is of course not referring to Princess Nihuang.

I only meant to remind Your Majesty – back then, when the Chiyan Army grew to such a degree of arrogance and defiance, was it not because they were not controlled earlier?”

A muscle on the Emperor's face twitched and his hand clenched involuntarily on the arm of his throne, and after a moment of silence, he said coldly, “Summon the imperial announcer.”

Summoning the imperial announcer naturally meant he had decided to issue an imperial decree.

An ecstatic smile spread across the Crown Prince's face, but Xie Yu glared at him and he hurriedly composed himself.

“The items your servant has come to report today are not

urgent,” Xie Yu bowed.

“Since Your Majesty has internal matters to handle, your servant will take his leave.”

“Ng,” the Emperor raised a hand and dismissed him, and then reclined back tiredly, one hand under his head.

The Crown Prince hurriedly ordered for soft pillows and silk blankets to be brought and personally laid them over the Emperor.

“You do not need to stay here.

We will issue the imperial edict today...go set your mother’s mind at rest....”

The Emperor let out a sigh.

“Your son thanks my father for his great mercy.”

The Crown Prince knelt and bowed three times, his forehead to the ground, then continued, “Do not worry Father, I will go to the imperial Mu residence tonight....”

“No,”

The Emperor raised a hand to stop him, his expression thunderous.

“How can you still not remember, you are the Crown Prince, the Eastern Palace’s heir to the throne!

You do not need to go to the imperial Mu residence, we will send someone.”

“Yes, Father.”

The Crown Prince did not dare object, and hurriedly bowed once more before getting up and leaving quietly.

The cold wind was blowing harshly outside the hall, and the Crown Prince walked towards the outer part of the palace, wrapped tightly in the fur coat the eunuch had passed to him.

In fact, as the lord of the Eastern Palace, he had the unique

privilege of riding a carriage inside the palace, but as a show of respect, the carriages of the Eastern Palace usually stopped at the doors of the outer gates, and the servants, waiting there amidst the wind and snow, hurried forward when they saw their master walking out.

“To the inner palace!”

With this simple command, the Crown Prince jumped into his yellow-roofed carriage, his actions hurried, as if he was afraid of the cold.

However, when the gold-silk curtains of the carriage drew shut, shutting out the outside world, the calm expression of the Crown Prince of the Eastern Palace abruptly shifted, his teeth gritting and a look of hatred passing over his face, as if he was finally letting the poorly-contained fury in his heart show.

The heir to the throne?

Am I the heir to the throne?

Father, if you really think of me as the heir, then why did you favour Prince Yu so much that you have raised him to become my competition?

Chapter 54: Loophole

“You useless thing, get out of my sight!

All of you, get out!”

The furious shout sounded from Prince Yu’s study, and two servant girls came stumbling out, one of them with her skirt half soaked in tea, and the other holding several fragments of a shattered tea cup in her hand, both pale and trembling in fear, with even their hair in a mess after their frenzied escape.

“What has happened to the Prince?”

The two servant girls raised their heads when they heard the gentle voice, and then hurriedly fell forward in a kneel.

“Princess Consort, the Prince said the tea was too hot...it is your servants’ fault for not preparing it well enough....”

Princess Consort Yu’s brow raised and she hurried to the study, pushed open the closed door, and entered.

“Who is that?

I told you all to get out, get out!”

“Prince....”

Princess Consort Yu said quietly, “Anger hurts the body, pray the Prince take care of your honoured self.”

Prince Yu balked and turned around, forced down his anger, and said, “Oh, it’s you.

Is anything wrong?”

“The new year is approaching, I have prepared the list of new year’s gifts for Father Emperor and Mother Empress, and came to have the Prince look over it.”

Prince Yu reached out a hand to receive the yellow piece of paper his wife handed him and quickly scanned it before returning it to

her.

“You have always been the best at pleasing Mother, and make her happy every year, so let the gifts this year be arranged according to your will.”

“I understand.”

Princess Consort Yu tucked the piece of paper back into her sleeve, then said slowly, “These servants of our manor have been poorly taught, it is my fault, please don’t be angry at them.”

“What does it have to do with you?”

It is their clumsiness and stupidity....”

Princess Consort Yu put a delicate hand on her husband’s arm, and asked gently, “What is the Prince upset about?”

Perhaps you can tell me, and let me share the burden.”

“It is not anything... they are external matters, you would not understand even if I told you....”

Prince Yu patted her hand and said warmly, “Do not worry.

You must be tired too, go rest.”

Princess Consort Yu delicately bit her crimson lip, and said lowly, “If it is because of Miss Banruo....”

“Where have your thoughts got to?”

Prince Yu raised an eyebrow.

“I am troubled over the concerns of the kingdom, you do not need to bring marital affairs into this.”

“Actually... I can go speak with Miss Banruo, although it is the rank of imperial consort,as long as it pleases the Prince, I would never cause her any trouble.

Even if the Prince were to raise her position in the future, I would also....”

“Speaking nonsense again!”

Prince Yu glared at her angrily, but, seeing her grow pale, he wrapped an arm around her and drew her into his embrace.

“Alright, I have said this many times, you are you, and Banruo is Banruo, and you will always be my only Princess Consort, so stop finding things to worry about.

I am still relying on you to please the Empress in the palace, and if you are unhappy yourself, how can you go and show respect and piety on my behalf?”

“I’m sorry....”

Princess Consort Yu wrapped her arms around her husband’s waist, leaning close against his chest.

“You are so good to me, I

wish I could be smarter and more capable, and could share more of your burdens....”

“You’re always thinking about this kind of nonsense, this is not good.”

Prince Yu gently pushed her away and stroked her hair.

“Go then, and let me think in peace.”

Princess Consort Yu nodded and curtsied, then slowly turned and left.

She had just walked to the well outside of the study when she came across Mister Tang, the best of the strategists of Prince Yu’s residence, and halted in her steps.

“Princess Consort Yu.”

Mister Tang bent forward in a bow.

“Please rise.

I was just looking for you.”

Princess Consort Yu raised a jade-like hand.

“The Prince is in a bad mood, do you think we should ask Miss Qin to come to consult on the situation?”

Mister Tang shook his head.

“This time, the problem lies in the palace, and Miss Banruo cannot help.”

“The palace?”

What has happened in the palace?”

“The Princess Consort does not know?”

The Emperor has decreed that the newly demoted Concubine Yue will be restored to Consort, and ordered her to participate in the sacrificial rites.”

Princess Consort Yue was taken aback.

“The lady Yue is pardoned...what did the Empress say?”

“The imperial edict was issued directly from the imperial announcer, without any warning, and the Empress did not know anything, so what could she say?”

“So that’s how it happened...the lady Yue has served in the palace for over a decade, the Emperor is likely acting out of old affection....”

Mister Tang knew that the Princess Consort Yu was pure and innocent of heart, and so did not explain any further, but simply smiled.

“Well then, I must trouble Mister to urge the Prince, since everything has already been decided, there is no use in being troubled over the situation.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“And ask him not to worry about the Inner Palace, I will be going directly to the palace to visit the Empress.”

Mister Tang said with a smile, “The Prince is fortunate to have such a capable helper in the Princess Consort.”

“You flatter me,”

Princess Consort Yu replied modestly, before continuing on her way.

Mister Tang hurried to the side of the road and bowed until she had disappeared into the distance.

Then, he narrowed his eyes and murmured to himself, “Consort Yue has been restored to her position, I wonder if that qilin prodigy who was responsible for pulling her down from her rank of noble consort is as angry as the Prince?”

In contrast to Mister Tang’s expectations, after hearing the news of Consort Yue’s pardon, Mei Changsu did not give any particular reaction, but stayed huddled beside his brazier, turning the pages of the report from Miaoyin House, and feeding each page into the fire as he finished reading.

Fei Liu squatted beside him, watching the flames rise and fall, and seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

The heavy cotton curtain was drawn aside, the roaring flames dying down a little from the cold wind that blew into the room, and Fei Liu turned his furious gaze onto the intruder.

Meng Zhi did not seem to notice Fei Liu’s hostile expression, but strode towards Mei Changsu, saying, “You’re looking pretty idle....”

“There is cold air lingering around you, don’t come too close to me.

Go and roast a bit first, and come back when you’re well cooked.”

Meng Zhi didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“Have you still not heard the news?

Guess where I’ve just come from.”

“The imperial Mu residence.”

He had guessed correctly on the first try, and Meng Zhi couldn't help raising an eyebrow, and came forward to pinch Mei Changsu's cheek, saying, “Xiao Shu, you've become more and more like a devil since your return, are you sure you are still living?”

Fei Liu's palm came flying over.

“Let go!”

“You've found me out,” Mei Changsu answered, laughing.

“I'm a ghost, are you scared?”

“If everyone could return, even as a ghost, I would still be happy,” Meng Zhi sighed.

“You guessed right, I have just come from the imperial Mu residence.

The little Lord Mu is so angry, he'll be leaving teeth marks on his cedar chair soon.”

“Good to chew!”

Fei Liu suddenly spoke up, and Meng Zhi eyed him uncomprehendingly.

“Our Fei Liu is right, cedar wood is soft, and good for chewing, you wouldn't need to bite very hard to leave teeth marks in it....”

Mei Changsu patted the youth's head in approval.

“Oi, you two....”

Meng Zhi looked at them helplessly.

“I'm being serious!”

“Fei Liu, Uncle Meng says you're not being serious....”

Mei Changsu prodded.

Fei Liu widened his eyes in confusion.

“Not being serious means being like Lin Chen gege.

Don't you remember how the uncles in the alliance were always scolding Lin Chen gege for not being serious?"

When Fei Liu heard that this uncle had dared to compare him to Lin Chen, he leaped to his feet in fury, flinging his palm out in a powerful strike.

Although Meng Zhi was not afraid, he still had to use considerable effort to fend him off, and in the blink of an eye, the two were exchanging blows across the room.

"Xiao Shu, tell him to stop, I have serious things to discuss with you!"

Meng Zhi yelled angrily.

Mei Changsu sat smiling, wrapped in his fur coat, and called out encouragingly, "Go on, Fei Liu, it's not often you get the chance to train with Uncle Meng...."

Meng Zhi saw that his playfulness had been aroused, and couldn't help feeling a hidden joy well up in his heart, because no matter what, it meant there was still a shadow of Lin Shu in him, and that was a relief, not to mention that exchanging blows with Fei Liu was always an immensely enjoyable task, and so he took a breath and settled himself for a proper fight.

Fei Liu's martial arts had always been strange and difficult to grasp, and against people like Xia Dong and Tuoba Hao who practiced a more predictable and conventional style, he naturally held the advantage, but once he came up against Meng Zhi's circular and grounded style of martial arts, he was blocked at every stroke, not to mention that in terms of inner strength, Fei Liu, who was young in age and had been severely injured before, was still far from Meng Zhi, who had been solidly trained in the traditional Shaolin style.

But it was because he was obviously not Meng Zhi's match that Fei Liu's fighting spirit burned all the more fiercely, and there was

no other thought in his mind except a wholly focused determination on the fight before him, and after a while, Meng Zhi realized something astounding.

Fei Liu could remember his opponent's strength and the characteristic features of his qi in the middle of the fight, and then immediately adjust his moves accordingly.

In other words, once you had used a certain move against him once, you could forget the idea of using it again, unless you increased its strength or changed the direction of the flow of its qi, otherwise, Fei Liu would block your attack and force you to use another quickly to save yourself.

It was hard to believe that such an astounding learning ability could be found in a youth with mental deficits.

But perhaps it was because his intelligence was restricted in some areas that his astonishing and prodigious martial arts had been aroused.

“Panicking yet?”

There was laughter in Mei Changsu's voice.

“Meng dage, it looks like you'll have to be even stronger.”

Meng Zhi laughed and replied, “There's no use trying to help him, when have I been so easy to distract?”

It's early yet if he thinks he can beat me!”

Although he had stopped to speak, his breath had not been disturbed in the slightest, and the Shaolin energy around him intensified as he brought his palms together into a circular position and headed towards Fei Liu.

The youth's forehead trembled and his figure suddenly blurred, disappearing from its original position and reappearing behind Meng Zhi.

But although he had moved quickly, he was somehow a beat

behind the slowly turning Meng Zhi, and as back suddenly became front, Fei Liu's palms were caught by Meng Zhi, who gave a powerful thrust and sent him flying backwards, and though Fei Liu flipped through the air a few times to regain his balance, he still landed somewhat unsteadily on his feet.

"Never mind, never mind," Mei Changsu beckoned to the youth.

"If you can't beat him this time, we will try again next time."

Meng Zhi made a face at him.

"Xiao Shu, are you using me to provoke this child?"

"What if I am?"

A bright smile lit Mei Changsu's face.

"You are not so easily insulted, so isn't it fun to train a bit with our Fei Liu?"

Look at how cute our Fei Liu is...."

Meng Zhi choked.

Beautiful, certainly, but cute...??

But in truth, he really liked this exceedingly talented youth, and did not mind exchanging a few blows now and then, so he smiled broadly and walked over to sit down beside Mei Changsu, saying, "You don't look surprised at all that Consort Yue's position has been restored."

"What is there to be surprised about?"

Mei Changsu said indifferently.

"Even if Consort Yue had committed an even greater crime, it was still not against the Emperor himself, and this Emperor has never cared much about other people's suffering.

Do you still not know this?"

"Do you really have to talk about His Majesty like that?"

Meng Zhi looked a bit awkward.

“No matter what, His Majesty is still His Majesty, and anyway, there are the year end’s sacrificial rites to consider.”

“What do the year end’s sacrificial rites have to do with anything?”

Mei Changu laughed coldly.

“Does the Crown Prince not have an imperial mother?”

After sprinkling the ceremonial wine, he should kneel and touch the robes of the Emperor and the Empress, that would be true filial piety.

Where is the difficulty in that?”

“Ah?”

Meng Zhi stared blankly.

“Then, all these years....”

“In the sacrificial rites of the previous years, it was because Consort Yue was a first-ranked noble consort, with a nine-pearl phoenix crown as well, and stood with the Empress beside the Emperor, and so when the Crown Prince knelt to touch her robe, everyone thought it natural.

Even the Ministry of Rituals, which is supposed to be the most sensitive to these ceremonies, did not correct the Crown Prince’s actions, and so of course no one else even noticed that anything was amiss.”

“What you say seems to make sense...”

Meng Zhi scratched his head.

“There are so many rules of the rituals, the Ministry of Rites should be most familiar with how each of them should be interpreted, so why has Old Minister Chen never said anything....”

“Chen Yuancheng?”

Mei Changsu's smile became even colder.

"The supposedly neutral Ministry of Rites, the Old Minister who 'only trusts in the rites'...haha...this is the funniest part...."

Meng Zhi stared at Mei Changsu.

"Xiao Shu, you mean...."

"Ever since Chen Yuancheng's only grandson deserted on the front lines, and Xie Yu hid his capital offense and protected him, this old minister has become a dog of the Marquis of Ning... Ai, and no wonder, after all, who can avoid the debts owed for the sake of sons and grandsons?

He Jingzhong is no exception, and neither is Chen Yuancheng."

Meng Zhi's mouth had fallen open in shock, and he stared dazedly for a long moment.

"Chen Yuancheng knows that, according to the rules of the rituals, as long as the Empress is present, Consort Yue is not important, but he does not dare say this.

Firstly, he has received Xie Yue's orders, and secondly, he knows the Emperor is only finding an excuse to pardon Consort Yue...."

Mei Changsu gave a derisive, cold laugh.

"Both of these so-called honest and loyal old ministers of two dynasties are, in the end, only a pair of old foxes."

Chapter 55: Deploying the Troops

These words that Mei Changsu had spoken so casually caused Meng Zhi to sit in stunned silence for a long while, and the more he thought about it, the more he felt how heart-chilling these partisan politics really were, and when he looked at Lin Shu, sitting there with his pale forehead slightly lowered, he couldn't help the complex feelings rising up in his heart.

Could the rare and prodigious talents of the shining Chiyan Young Marshal of those days now only be spent on things like this?

“Meng dage, you do not need to worry about me.”

Mei Changsu gently raised his head, as if looking through the roof into the dark void beyond.

“They are all watching me from above, I must continue down this path.”

“I understand.”

Meng Zhi nodded heavily.

“But you must remember, in all things, you must place your safety first, and if there is anything I can help with, you must tell me.”

Mei Changsu couldn't help smiling.

“When have I ever been polite with you?”

“That's difficult to say, your thoughts are so serious now, no one knows what you're really thinking.”

Meng Zhi looked at him, unconvinced.

“Last time when you went to the imperial Jing residence, why didn't you take me with you?”

“Did you want to hold me upright and teach that bunch of hotheads a lesson for me?”

Mei Changsu laughed out loud.

“You’re right, they are all hardened soldiers who only respect heroes and warriors, if even Commander Meng seemed to admire me, none of them would dare look down on me again.”

“That’s what I mean!

But you went alone without a word, and made yourself some enemies.

The imperial Jing residence is where you will be settling down to do your work in the future, how could you offend them on your first visit?”

“Don’t worry, the more intelligent among them will only thank me, and will not hold a grudge.

The ones who are feeling insulted have brawn but no brains, and I don’t want to care about people like that for now, one day they will be in my hands, and I will mold them then.

You forget, managing rough, wild generals like these is my specialty.”

Meng Zhi thought for a moment and couldn’t help smiling.

“You do have a point.”

“...That’s right, I’ve been meaning to ask you, in the imperial Mu residence, aside from the little Lord Mu leaving teeth marks all over the place, how did the others react?”

“Of course they were all furious.

His Majesty only sent an internal messenger to pass on a verbal message, telling the Princess not to be oversensitive, and seemed to mean that if she harboured any dissatisfaction over the edict, she would be doubting her lord in her role as his subject.”

Meng Zhi looked uneasy.

“Whose slander has His Majesty been listening to, that he’s

treating such a loyal, outstanding minister so haughtily?”

“How was the Princess?”

“The Princess was actually very calm, and didn’t betray any sign of anger at all.”

Mei Changsu sighed lightly.

“Nihuang has been commander for so many years, I think she has seen through the situation.

For those who hold military power, if they do not accomplish anything, they are scolded for being useless, but once they achieve great deeds, they are feared for their power and influence.

No matter what a military general does, he cannot avoid the endless checks and balances his lord will impose upon him.

Now that the Southern border is relatively quiet, if the Emperor doesn’t remind her of his imperial power and control now, when would he have the chance?”

“But the little Lord Mu cannot seem to control himself, and is talking about requesting for permission to return to Yunnan.”

“The Emperor would not give it.”

Mei Changsu shook his head.

“Besides, the new year is near, if they leave in a hurry now, it will appear as if they are angry at the Emperor, and it will only raise suspicion and rumor.

Go and convince Mu Qing, even if he wants to leave, he must at least wait until after Qingming, and offer the ceremonial sacrifices in the capital before going.”

“When has that boy ever been willing to listen to me?

Besides, if anyone is to be convinced, shouldn’t it be Princess Nihuang?”

Mei Changsu’s gaze stilled, the expression in his eyes fathomless

as he nodded slowly, and answered in a low voice, "You're right.

Then I will write a letter, and will trouble you to bring it to Nihuang.

She is wise and astute, and will understand immediately."

As he spoke, he turned and patted Fei Liu on the shoulder.

"Su gege needs to write, Fei Liu can grind the ink, alright?"

"Yes!"

Fei Liu jumped up and bounded over to the desk, grabbed the stick of ink, put it up to his mouth and breathed on it, and then began grinding furiously.

He was putting all his strength into the task, and his grinding motions were fast, and soon, the whole table was covered in ink flakes.

"That's enough, that's enough," Mei Changsu turned a warm smile on him.

"When Su gege finishes writing, you can paint, alright?"

"Yes!"

Mei Changsu drew two sheets of snowy white letter paper from the pile of books on the desk, dipped his brush in the ink, and murmured to himself for a moment before filling two pages with writing, then lifted the sheets and blew them dry gently before folding them into an envelope, but did not seal it before holding it out to Meng Zhi.

"Aren't you afraid I'll read it?"

Meng Zhi did not take it, but said with a smile, "You didn't write anything I'm not supposed to read, did you?"

Mei Changsu lowered his head and said expressionlessly, "Meng dage, you must not make such jokes again.

The Princess is like a sister to me, nothing more."

Meng Zhi was taken aback.

“Why do you say that?”

I know there are any difficulties ahead and many things you must do, and so you do not want to tell her who you are for now, but in the future...you must tell her one day....”

“Who knows how far away that day may be?”

Mei Changsu lifted the brush again and absently drew a dozen lines on the sheet in front of him, but before he had finished, he had already picked it up and crumpled it into a ball before tossing it into the brazier beside him, closing his eyes, “It is impossible to live in the past...there are some things in this world whose coming cannot be predicted, and cannot be controlled, all I can do is to try to bring them to a good end, even if it is an end in which I have no part....”

“Xiao Shu,” Meng Zhi grasped his arm, “you mean....”

“Meng dage, you must also consider Nihuang’s position, I have hindered her for so many years, I cannot continue to do so.

If I had once thought to try hard to return to her side, then ever since two years ago, I have abandoned all such intentions.”

Mei Changsu gripped Meng Zhi’s hand tightly, a thin but incredibly sincere smile on his face.

“My existence has not brought her joy in the past, but at least, it will not become her grief in the future.

If I can achieve this, I will be very happy....”

“But....”

Meng Zhi’s face crumpled.

“This is too unfair to you!”

“When has there ever been anything absolutely fair in this world?”

If you say it is unfair, then it is a problem of fate, a misalignment of the stars, and no matter what, it is not Nihuang's responsibility."

Meng Zhi looked at him for a long time, and then stamped his foot and sighed.

"I cannot interfere in your personal affairs, let it be as you say then."

Mei Changsu smiled and pushed the letter into his hand.

"Alright, deliver this letter for me, and don't say another word, if you keep spouting nonsense, I will be angry."

"Yes, Young Marshal.

I'll be like Fei Liu, and speak two words at a time!"

"Cannot!"

Fei Liu said loudly.

"Look, Fei Liu says you can't."

Mei Changsu ruffled the youth's hair with a smile.

"Well-said, we won't let him copy you!"

"Oh you," Meng Zhi let out a sigh.

"How can you still laugh?"

"If not laugh, then what? Do you want to see me cry?"

Mei Changsu looked at him, then drew out another sheet of paper and wrote quickly.

"What are you doing?

Didn't you finish?"

"The ink is still wet, I'm writing to Prince Yu."

"Ah?!"

"You don't have to be this surprised, do you?"

Mei Changsu straightened and cocked his head at him.

“Don’t you know I am, to some extent, leaning towards Prince Yu?”

“I know you have already offended the Crown Prince for Nihuang’s sake, and so of course you must pretend to support Prince Yu...but what are you writing?”

“I think it is time for old Minister Chen to take a break from his duties, and so am preparing to hand this job over to Prince Yu.”

Meng Zhi’s eyes widened.

“Does Prince Yu listen to whatever you say now?

You can order him to do anything you like?”

“It’s not like that,” Mei Changsu didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“This is not an order, only a piece of advice.”

“Advice?”

“That’s right, Prince Yu is fuming over Consort Yue’s restored position and wants to retaliate, but doesn’t know how.

It would be good for me to point out Chen Yuanchen’s weakness to him, so he can vent out some of his anger.”

A hint of coldness flitted across Mei Changsu’s bland expression, and as he spoke, his hand kept writing.

“The Empress has no trueborn son, and so has fallen out of favour, while Noble Consort Yue has always been highly honoured, and the two are almost always held at an equal position in many matters of the Inner Palace, and so it seems that everyone has forgotten the difference between imperial wife and concubine.

Besides, the regulations of the sacrificial rites are complicated, it is difficult to even know how the Empress and Prince Yu’s relationship should be interpreted, and there have never been any

references to consult.

So, Prince Yu can invite several learned scholars and authorities into the palace for a court debate, and as their words have weight, once they have clearly determined the precedence of the imperial wife over the concubine in the sacrificial rites, the serious mistake committed by the Ministry of Rites these past few years will be revealed, and Chen Yuancheng will have no choice but to resign.

With all this, Xie Yu will lose another one of his helpers, Noble Consort Yue's restored power will be greatly limited, the Empress' position will be even more respected, and the Crown Prince's recently restored arrogance can be suppressed a little...."

"Then isn't all this...going to benefit Prince Yu?

Are you really putting all this effort into helping him?"

Mei Changsu gave a cold laugh.

"Are there any trades in this world with only gains and no losses?

Prince Yu's losses are in a place that is not easily seen or understood."

Meng Zhi tried to think about this, but gave up after awhile.

"What place is this?"

"The heart of His Majesty, the Emperor."

"Huh?"

"The one who began this practice of raising an imperial concubine to a rank equal to the imperial wife is His Majesty.

It is because he favoured Consort Yue so heavily and did not give the Empress enough respect in the Inner Palace that everyone has the mistaken impression that, because Consort Yue has the Crown Prince for a son, she is as honoured as the Empress.

When Prince Yu brings up this issue, he will not only be revealing the Ministry of Rites' error, he will also uncover His Majesty's

fault, but his position will be well-grounded and so His Majesty will not say anything against him, and may even bestow a few words of praise.

But deep in his heart, His Majesty will not be happy, and may even behave even more coldly towards the Empress for this defiance.

I will not mention this loss for now, and see if Prince Yu notices it himself.”

Meng Xhi said thoughtfully, “There are many talented people by Prince Yu’s side, perhaps one of them will see it.”

“Even if they see it, it doesn’t matter, Prince Yu will still do this.”

“Why?”

“Because the gains greatly outweigh the losses.”

Mei Changsu had finished the letter, and was blowing on it lightly.

“He will only lose His Majesty’s favour, which can be slowly regained.

But if he wins the debate, he will greatly increase the Empress’ honour and lower Consort Yue’s, and more importantly, Prince Yu can use this opportunity to emphasize something the court has forgotten: the Crown Prince, too, was born of a concubine, and in this respect, he is no different from Prince Yu.

The position and honour he holds now is because he has received the title of the Eastern Palace, and not because of his birth.

If His Majesty the Emperor were to take this title away in the future and give it to another, there is no need to raise a fuss, because the Crown Prince is not the trueborn son of the imperial wife, and so there is nothing untouchable about him.”

“But then, it is still Prince Yu who reaps the benefit....”

“Is it only Prince Yu?”

Mei Changsu turned his head, his eyes bright.

“Is Prince Jing not the same?”

Since they are all sons of concubines, no one can accuse anyone else of low birth.

The Crown Prince, Prince Yu, Prince Jing, and the other princes are all more or less equal in birth ranking, and even if there is some small difference, it is not at all the same kind of distance found between the sons of imperial wives and concubines, and so isn't even worth mentioning.”

“That's right!”

Meng Zhi clapped his hands.

“How did I not realize, when Prince Yu pulls the Crown Prince down to his level, he is at the same time pulling Prince Jing up, because he wants to emphasize that, while birthright may be an unbreachable gap between the sons of imperial wives and those of concubines, between the sons of concubines themselves, it is no longer the most important consideration, and though this reminder benefits himself, it applies just as well to Prince Jing!”

“I'm glad you understand.” Mei Changsu smiled, and this time, firmly sealed the envelope.

“Fei Liu, go out with Uncle Li and deliver this letter, alright?”

Meng Zhi glanced at Fei Liu.

“You're letting them deliver it?”

“Li Gang is a gifted speaker, and there is Fei Liu for security, going out to deliver a letter like this is a waste of their talents.”

Mei Changsu nonchalantly placed the letter in Fei Liu's hand, his gaze passing over him leisurely.

“The rest is up to Prince Yu....”

Chapter 56: Zhou Xuanqing

With the new year's arrival, Xiao Jingrui, Yan Yujin and Xie Bi finally returned to the capital from the Huqiu hot springs.

They had just been back for a day when, to their shock, they realized that, although they had only been away one month, the situation in the capital had changed rapidly, and was now even more excited and chaotic than it had been when they left.

The fight between the Crown Prince and Prince Yu had largely reached a stalemate in recent years due to the balance of their power, and everything seemed peaceful on the surface, with neither side causing any great ripples.

Who could have thought that such a great storm had been building beneath the surface, which had only needed the slightest push before erupting into open war.

Consort Yue's demotion, Lou Zhijing's fall from grace, the Duke of Qing's collapse, He Wenxin's death sentence...wave after wave broke over the capital so rapidly that one couldn't seem to catch a breath in their midst.

Now, Consort Yue's position had just been restored, and imperial officials were already lining up to accuse the Ministry of Rites of improper handling of the sacrificial rites, and Prince Yu took advantage of the situation to invite many famous and renowned scholars into the palace for a court debate to discuss the special treatment Consort Yue had received for so many years, as well as the lack of respect the Crown Prince had shown towards the Empress in the ceremony.

Everything aside, even just the ten or so old gentleman Prince Yu had invited were men of great renown and honour, and it was clear that the effort he had put into courting these scholars over the years had not been in vain, and he had managed to accumulate quite a following.

One of these was the elderly Mister Zhou Xuanqing, who resided in Lingyin Temple to the west of the capital, and who was truly one of the most prestigious and well-respected scholars of this age.

Normally, he refused all visitors, royal or common, and so it was a shock when he consented to come personally to Jinling this time, and his arrival prompted many people to regard Prince Yu with a whole new level of respect.

But strangely, after entering the capital, this old Mister Zhou did not stay in the

residence Prince Yu had set aside for the visiting scholars, Liuhe Courtyard, but at the imperial Mu residence instead.

And, according to rumor, Mister Zhou had been personally escorted to the capital from Lingyin Temple by the little Lord Mu, and once he entered the Mu residence, he had not received a single visitor, and even Prince Yu was no exception.

But the most important part was not who had really invited old Mister Zhou Xuanqing or whom he had received, but rather the prestige and honour of his reputation, which made even the Emperor defer to him in court, and with his thorough learning and extensive knowledge, not many people could stand up to him in the debate.

And so, the Ministry of Rites could not avoid disaster this time, and even Yan Yujin, who usually paid little attention to courtesy and etiquette, was able to predict the Crown Prince's imminent defeat.

The debate finally ended after three days and arrived at the following conclusion:

Although Consort Yue's position had been restored, she should not stand beside the Emperor and Empress on the sacrificial platform during the ceremony, and after the Crown Prince had sprinkled the ceremonial wine, he should kneel and touch the

robes of the Emperor and Empress.

The Ministry of Rites had been neglectful of its duties, and Chen Yuancheng was to be relieved of his position, but because of his age, he would be allowed to retire from the court without further investigation.

The Crown Prince, whose identity as a concubine's son had been emphasized by Prince Yu repeatedly during the debate, couldn't control his fury and actually slapped Prince Yu across the face, which earned him a severe scolding by the Emperor in front of the entire court.

In all the chaos, only Prince Jing stood quietly, watching coolly from the sidelines, and with his tranquil expression and unflappable nature, he left a very good impression in the minds of many court ministers who had not noticed him before.

And so, not long after the Ministry of Revenue had changed hands, the Ministry of Rites became the second department to receive a new head.

When Chen Yuancheng reached out with trembling hands to remove the minister's cap he had worn for almost twenty years from his aged white head, it was as if Prince Jing could see the pale hands gently stirring in the background, and the clear face with the calm expression which never seemed to change.

And yet, most people had no idea that Su Zhe, who had gradually faded away from public perception, had played a role at all in this event.

Two days of sunshine did nothing to raise the temperature, and the cloudless sunrise dawned colder than ever.

The city gates had just been opened when the guards and soldiers saw an extremely luxurious carriage approaching, escorted by almost a hundred mounted guards.

Even if they did not recognize the sign of the imperial Mu

residence on the front of the carriage, they would still have known that this was no ordinary guest, and so the leader of the guards hurriedly ordered his men to clear the road, and then bowed the large group out of the city.

Because the weather was so cold, those escorting the carriage blew out white steam with every breath, but the curtains of the carriage were thick, and with a warm stove inside, the interior of the carriage was not very cold.

There were two passengers in the carriage, one very elderly in age, one still in his youth, one in simple cotton robes and shoes, one dressed in embroidery and pearls.

The elderly gentleman had closed his eyes to rest, but the young man seemed impatient with the journey, and was squirming about restlessly.

“Grandfather Zhou, would you like some tea?”

The old man, without opening his eyes, shook his head.

After a while: “Grandfather Zhou, would you like some pastries?”

The old man once again refused it silently.

After another while: “Grandfather Zhou, would you like to try this candy?”

Old Mister Zhou Xuanqing finally peeled open his eyelids and looked at him.

There was an innocent smile on Mu Qing’s face as he held out the piece of candy.

“This is very tasty.”

The little Lord Mu seemed completely unaware of and unaffected by the solemn and strict air that this old Mister Zhou had cultivated over many years.

From the beginning, he had treated this old gentleman as just a normal old grandfather, and even after Zhou Xuanqing had

rendered all his opponents speechless in the court debate and succeeded in landing the blow for his sister, at the most, he had altered his perception of the gentleman to “a very capable normal old grandfather,” and so in their daily interactions, he treated him casually, like a family member, and did not uphold strict courtesy or keep any formal distance.

The little Lord Mu was a charming and intelligent young man, with a lively and cheerful disposition, and did not harbour the slightest sign of arrogance as a result of his noble rank, and so Zhou Xuanqing was very fond of this adorable member of the younger generation, and it was only that his solemn air gave off a rather severe impression, as he shook his head in refusal expressionlessly in response to the sweet inquires of the young man.

“This kind doesn’t stick in the teeth.”

Mu Qing explained.

“Try one?”

“The little lord should eat them himself.”

Zhou Xuanqing answered, his narrowed gaze turning towards the tassels on the roof of the carriage, and after a few moments, he suddenly asked, “Little lord, that token, could I see it once more?”

“Oh,” Mu Qing hurriedly swallowed his mouthful of candy and wiped his fingers with a handkerchief before taking out a small cloth bag from his person and handing it to Zhou Xuanqing.

The bag was opened and upended, and an intricately carved jade cicada tumbled out, its surface exceptionally bright, clearly made of an extremely expensive type of precious jade.

But for Zhou Xuanqing, the worth of this jade cicada did not lie in its monetary value.

“Little lord, you said that the person who asked you to bring this jade cicada to me is waiting outside the city?”

Mu Qing nodded.

“That’s what he said in his letter.

He said he would meet you once on your journey back to Lingyin Temple from the capital.”

Zhou Xuanqing gave a “Ng,” tightened his hand around the jade cicada, and closed his eyes again.

About an hour later, the carriage suddenly drew to a stop.

Mu Qing glanced out the curtain, and then turned around and said, “Grandfather Zhou, the person you want to see is here.”

Zhou Xuanqing’s brow furrowed, and he grasped Mu Qing’s arm for support as he tottered off the carriage.

He was just looking around when a middle-aged man came forward and said reverently, “Old Mister Zhou, my master is waiting over there, please come with me.”

As he spoke, he took Mu Qing’s place and supported the old gentleman by the arm, carefully helping him over to an inconspicuous nook by the side of the road which was also out of the wind, where Mei Changsu waited with a smile, his black hair dark against the white fur of his coat as he bowed gently in greeting.

Zhou Xuanqing narrowed his eyes, carefully appraising him, and then held up the jade cicada and asked, “This jade cicada, is it yours?”

“It is.”

“How did you come to have it?”

“It was given to me by Li Chong, Mister Li.”

“Who was Li Chong to you?”

“I once had the honour of being taught by old Mister Li.”

Zhou Xuanqing frowned.

“In those years, although Brother Li was the royal tutor, he did not reject commoners as his pupils, and his teaching extended far beyond the walls of the palace.

His students number in the thousands if not millions, and naturally may be found all over the kingdom.

But in the end, there were not many who truly made him proud, and as his good friend, I know them all, but you...I do not recognize....”

Mei Changsu smiled faintly.

“I was not a proficient pupil and brought no honour to my teacher’s name, and did not spend much time under his teaching, so it is only natural that you do not know me.”

Zhou Xuanqing looked at him doubtfully for a long moment, then sighed.

“No matter, you have Brother Li’s token, so of course I will help you, I just never would have thought that I would see my old friend’s jade cicada again after so many years for the sake of matters of the court....

Back then, when Brother Li was stripped of his position, he left the capital full of anger and bitterness, and I only wonder whether he would have approved of my coming to the court this time....”

Mei Changsu’s gaze was calm as he said quietly, “That year, the crime of my teacher lay in his blunt words, which became his downfall.

Although he knew his words would offend the imperial countenance, he persisted in speaking his mind and expressed his views without regret, acting in accordance with the conduct of great scholars.

Therefore, it is my belief that there is dao to be followed in everything in this world.

There is dao in the hidden places of mountains and forests, and there is dao in the lofty palaces and courts.

As long as one's heart is pure, and one does not betray his convictions or speak contrary to his beliefs, what does it matter where one stands?"

Zhou Xuanqing raised an eyebrow, a light shining in his aged gaze as he nodded and said, "Although you were not his student for long, you understand him to the bone, and I see that he was wise to bestow this jade cicada upon you.

Do you know why Brother Li used to wear this cicada on his belt?"

Mei Changsu's hands twisted slowly, his chin furrowing as he murmured, "'The dew of the night dampens their wings, the wind softens their cries; no one believes my noble conduct, who will reveal to me his heart'?"

Zhou Xuanqing closed his eyes lightly, as if silently settling his thoughts for a long moment, while Mei Changsu gazed calmly into the horizon.

The two stood quietly in the crisp winter air, without the slightest trace of awkwardness, as if they had only met to reminisce upon certain years of the past.

"To be able to meet again one of the distinguished pupils of Brother Li in my old age is truly beyond what I could have hoped for."

Zhou Xuanqing slowly placed the jade cicada into Mei Changsu's hand and said lowly, "I do not know which way the wind is blowing in the capital, but I only hope that you will not forget the pure and honest reputation of your teacher, and take good care of yourself."

Mei Changsu bowed, his face filled with respect.

"I will remember your valuable advice.

You have braved the snow and cold to answer the call of old friendship, I am truly grateful beyond words.”

Zhou Xuanqing waved a hand.

“For this jade cicada, a trip to the city is nothing, even journeying to the distant lands would not be too much to ask.

Now as your requests have been fulfilled, it is time for me to return to the temple.

We will part here.”

Mei Changsu hurriedly raised a hand and beckoned to the guards waiting to the side, gesturing for them to support the old gentleman, as he himself bowed and said, “Please take care.”

Zhou Xuanqing gave a “Ng,” and took a few steps forward, supported by the guards, and then suddenly stopped and turned around.

“In those years, Brother Li had a most beloved disciple, who, despite being the high-spirited son of a military general, was also unusually intelligent and an avid scholar, and if you had been present then, perhaps the two of you would have made a formidable pair.”

Mei Changsu’s face was pale as snow, and a brittle smile drifted over his lips as he said quietly, “The old Mister is too kind.

It is my misfortune, that fate has not allowed me to admire this person with my own eyes.”

“Yes, this person...will never be seen again....”

Grief clouded Zhou Xuanqing’s gaze as he turned and walked away without looking back.

Chapter 57: My Longing Heart

The imperial Mu residence's carriage disappeared into the distance, leaving behind only a trail of dust, which dissipated gradually in the cold, harsh air.

As he stepped out from the nook in the side of the road, strong gusts of cold wind immediately swept around Mei Changsu, blowing his dark hair into disarray.

The middle-aged guard who had been waiting to one side hurried over, reaching out to rearrange the disheveled head, but was gently pushed aside by that pair of ice-cold hands.

There was a mild slope before them, the grass long since covered in snow, the few trees bare and stripped of their leaves, looking exceptionally bleak.

Mei Changsu looked at the corner of the robe which could just be seen over the peak of the hill, reached out a hand to brush at the hair which had been blown all over his face, then walked quickly to the slope and strode all the way to the top before slowing his steps.

Under the falling snow, Princess Nihuang stood, her jade-coloured cape flapping in the wind, showing that the female commander of the southern border was truly unafraid of the cold.

Mei Changsu had not thought that the Princess would come, but now that she was here, he did not think of avoiding her.

She had once been his little girl, and so no matter how brilliant and impressive she was now, no matter where her love had turned, it could not change that purest, sincerest friendship of the past, nor could it change the guilt and tenderness he felt for her in his heart.

Hearing Mei Changsu's footsteps, Princess Nihuang turned her beautiful face and smiled warmly at him.

Since they had parted that day in Wuying Hall, the two had not met since.

But what had to be said had been passed along by Xia Dong, and with Nihuang's proud temperament, no matter whether she had decided to sever all ties with that young man or to wait patiently for him, she would not react like other girls, and harbour suspicious misgivings or nag incessantly for answers.

And so, Mei Changsu did not know why Nihuang had taken this opportunity to meet him outside the city.

"Mister Su, it has been awhile, have you been well?"

Her first words were always courteous pleasantries, etiquette designed to increase the distance between two people.

"I thank the Princess, everything has been well.

Soon after I moved into my new manor, I received the abundant favour and gifts from your esteemed residence, and have not yet come in person to deliver my thanks, please forgive me."

"You are too polite."

Nihuang took a step closer, radiating health and vigor, as if the troubles of the capital had not left half a mark on her person.

Mei Changsu couldn't help smiling.

"The Princess gives off such a grand air, with a manner as clear as moonlight."

"How could I compare to your own manner, which is as deep as the sea?"

Nihuang laughed.

"Even Old Mister Zhou answers your call, the power of Jiangzuo Alliance is truly immeasurable."

"It is only that fate brought together a few jianghu warriors down on their luck, and so the Alliance was formed." Mei Changsu

glanced at the Princess, and not wanting her to bring up the subject herself, decided to speak first. “My Alliance values justice above all else, and we are not overly strict with our members, and so...the reason he cannot come to the capital is not because he was forbidden, but because there is truly another reason....”

“That is not what I wanted to ask,” Nihuang met his gaze calmly, her gaze shining like stars. “I know why he cannot come.”

“You know?” Mei Changsu was a bit surprised. “You mean....”

“When he came such a great distance to Yunnan to help me that year, and turned disaster into victory, the entire Southern border sang his praises, and so although we knew that he was wearing a disguise, no one even attempted to see his true face.”

Mei Changsu lowered his gaze. He already knew what she was going to say.

“...Later, we built up a close friendship, but he still avoided and refused to address the issue, I asked him many times but he still would not say anything, until finally, he could no longer withstand the questioning and finally showed me his true appearance.”

“Ng...” Mei Changsu’s expression was still as he drew his hands into his sleeve. “And after you saw it?”

“At first, I only thought he looked familiar, and it was only after I studied him a few more times and then thought for a long while that I remembered who he was....” Although a small smile remained on Princess Nihuang’s face, there was pain in her eyes. “He is in your Jiangzuo Alliance, you should know his true name too, right?”

Mei Changsu nodded impassively. “Yes, I know it.”

“Then you say it.”

“Nie Duo, one of the generals of the traitorous Chiyan Army, if anyone knew of his survival, he would be a criminal of the court.”

“Then,” Nihuang gazed at him fiercely, “have you drawn such a person into your Jiangzuo Alliance truly to shelter and protect him, or because you are preparing to use him in the future?”

Mei Hangsu took a few slow steps forward and leaned on a barren, half-withered tree trunk, smiling ruefully. “Certainly I will use him. I fear Jiangzuo Alliance has not taken such a great risk in sheltering a criminal simply for the sake of accumulating merit and virtue.”

Princess Nihuang’s brow furrowed and a ferocious expression flashed across her powdered face. “Is that the truth?”

Mei Changsu turned his head, his dark pupils shining like opals as his gaze lifted slowly to the Princess’ face. “And what if it is?”

“If it is, then I must take Nie Duo away, and even if I must use all the power of the imperial Mu household, I will ensure his safety. This is not only for the sake of the regard I bear for him, but more importantly to repay him for stabilizing the situation at the Southern border and saving thousands of my soldiers.”

A smile drifted over Mei Changsu’s lips, somehow conveying grief, emotion, gratitude, and wistfulness all at once, as he met Nihuang’s gaze and gently shook his head. “You are a Princess, he is a traitorous general, how can the two of you join together openly and properly? His Majesty the Emperor would never allow you to marry a jianghu man of unknown origin. Besides, since you recognized him, then naturally others may recognize him as well, so would you really ask him to remain in disguise all his life in order to stay by your side?”

Nihuang bit her lip hard and turned her face away, stubbornly refusing to let anyone see her in weakness. “What other choice is there? Ever since I realized he was Nie Duo, I knew my future would not be easy. I once hoped that he would enter the marriage competition under a false identity and fight his way to me step by step, but in the end, he did not appear.... There were so many

times when I wanted to ask you what he really thought, but I feared he had hidden his true identity even from Jiangzuo Alliance, and you might not know who he really was. It was only when you sent Xia Dong to me with your letter that I was certain that you too know his identity, because he had even told you everything between us, and so that meant he has hidden nothing from you.”

“You are correct,” Mei Changsu’s voice was perfectly steady, and seemed to carry a soothing power. “Nie Duo trusts me very much, he has no secrets from me, nor I from him. I hope that now, you can trust me in the same way. I will do everything in my power to ensure that the two of you will be able to one day stand in dignity side by side, holding your wedding ceremony in Yingfeng Hall without masks or disguise, under your true names, and openly receiving the blessing of anyone who wants to wish you well....

“How is that possible?” Nihuang widened her eyes in disbelief. “Unless the Chiyan Army is acquitted, all of this is only an impossible dream.”

“Where there is a will, there is a way,” Mei Changsu said coolly. “Unless you believe the Chiyan Army really were traitors?”

Nihuang took a few steps back, her shoulders trembling slightly. “I do not know...I was very young then...I only know that the few people I knew would never have rebelled against their lord and betrayed their country...but what is the use of discussing this now? The case has an ironclad conclusion, and neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu would ever restore the name of the Chiyan Army, because this old case was their greatest masterpiece!”

“Yes, neither the Crown Prince nor Prince Yu would overturn the Chiyan Army’s case.” Mei Changsu gazed steadily ahead of him, a coldness creeping along his skin. “But no one has ever looked to them. ...To achieve this goal, there is only one path that can be taken.”

Nihuang's lip trembled suddenly, her face paling and then abruptly flushing again, as what had previously been clouded in fog suddenly came into sharp relief, showing her the clear conclusion.

“Prince Jing...you...you want to support Prince Jing....”

Faced with Mei Changsu's silence, Nihuang's mind was blank. But this commander and veteran of countless battles only took a few deep breaths and quickly gathered her composure, steadying herself.

“You are right, only Prince Jing could do it....” Princess Nihuang bit her lip and paced a few steps. “But it is too difficult... it is truly too difficult, one misstep and you will have carved your own doom, with no hope of turning back.”

“Whoever thought of turning back?” Mei Changsu said indifferently. “In the future, you may ask Nie Duo as well, when has he ever thought of turning back?”

“Nie Duo is different, he is a Chiyan veteran, he must redeem the injustice done to him, but you...” Nihuang halted, as if suddenly realizing something. “You...who are you? Why would you take such a great risk for the sake of this old case of the Chiyan Army?”

Chapter 58: No Scars of the Past

When Su Zhe first appeared in the capital, many people asked, “Who is this person?” The answer was quickly discovered – Su Zhe was Mei Changsu, the chief of Jiangzuo Alliance, the world’s number one sect. This answer brought everyone great satisfaction and seemed to explain many things, and so not a single person continued to ask, “Then Mei Changsu...who is he?”

Mei Changsu had not thought that the first person to ask this question would be Princess Nihuang. Now, her sharp gaze bore through him like a sword, fixed on his face, watching for the slightest shift in expression as she waited for his reply.

Should he dodge the question and refuse to answer, or deceive her even further? It was a difficult choice.

There was a weariness in Mei Changsu’s expression as he slowly turned his head, as if to avoid the Princess’ question, and said lowly, “A veteran. Like Nie Duo, a veteran who survived.”

Nihuang’s gaze was like crystal as she continued to stare at him. “If you are a Chiyan veteran, why don’t I recognize you?”

“The soldiers of the Chiyan Army were countless in number, how could you remember them all?”

“But you are now chief of the Alliance, and even Nie Duo serves willingly under you, obeying your orders. If you say you were only a nameless soldier back then, I do not believe you.”

“Perhaps it is because...the matters we deal with now have no relation to the battlefield....” A self-mocking smile lingered at the corner of Mei Changsu’s lip. “Nie Duo is not talented in this way, and besides he is known by too many people, so it would not be convenient.”

Nihuang looked at him steadily for a long while, and asked suddenly, “Do you know Lin Shu?”

Meo Changsu lowered his eyes. How could a Chiyan veteran not know Lin Shu? And so he could only reply, “I know him.”

“Did he really die on the battlefield?”

“Yes.”

“Where did he die?”

“Meiling.”

“His body and his bones – where were they buried?”

“To those seventy thousand soldiers, the sky was their tomb, and the earth, their graves.”

“Not even his bones were gathered?”

Nihuang shut her eyes tightly, her fingers clenching around her robes.

“Not even a single piece of his remains were found?”

“Such is the bitter reality of the battlefield, where corpses stack as high as mountains.

Who could have known which among them was Lin Shu?”

“Yes....”

Nihuang nodded dazedly.

“I know what the battlefield is like.

In all the battles of history, how many have returned with their bodies wrapped properly in shrouds?”

Mei Changsu’s gaze fell warmly onto her.

“If the Princess wishes to offer sacrifices in his memory, there is no place his noble spirit would not accept your offerings.”

“You are right, he would not have minded this.”

Nihuang murmured to herself, then suddenly looked up, a fierce expression in her eyes.

“But if you are a Chiyan veteran, you should have referred to him as Young Marshal, why did you call him by his name, Lin Shu?”

Mei Changsu’s gaze seemed to tremble slightly, his already pale lips whitening even further.

Whether it was because he could not longer hide it, or because he could not bear to hide it any longer, he did not answer her question, but turned his face away.

“Whenever Nie Duo mentions his chief, his loyalty and devotion are immediately apparent, and it does not appear to be a simple matter of division of labour, as you claim.”

Nihuang stubbornly turned to face him, staring at him insistently.

“I have never understood the depth of Nie Duo’s pain, even if I were the betrothed of his comrade who died in battle, it is still not reason enough for this kind of struggle and despair, unless...unless he knows....”

“Nihuang,” Mei Changsu stopped her impassively.

“Nie Duo has only dug himself into a corner.

He will get better slowly, you do not need to be overly suspicious.”

Nihuang stared at him, a terrible sorrow on her face, and as she breathed out hard in the cold air, the white fog seemed to blur her vision.

Taking a deep breath, she suddenly grabbed Mei Changsu’s right arm, pulled open the tassel binding his sleeve and forcefully pushed back his thick fur robes, all the way up to the elbow.

Mei Changsu let her manipulate him and did not push her away or cover his arm, but a mournful bleakness had appeared in his dark gaze.

Nihuang grasped his arm and turned it a few times, inspecting it

carefully, but the skin was clean, without any scars or marks.

She released his arm in bewilderment and was silent for a long moment, but Nihuang was still unconvinced, and so she reached out a hand to pull at Mei Changsu's collar, closely inspecting the area around his neck.

...the skin was still clean, unmarked and unscarred.

The young girl's tears finally fell, trailing down her face continuously, as if the teardrops would freeze in the bitter wind and crystallize into mermaids' pearls.

Mei Changsu looked at her gently, unable to come closer, unable to offer any comfort.

The icy wind crept along his opened sleeve and collar, burrowing deep into his skin, seeming to chill him straight to the bone, as if it might at any moment penetrate into his heart and force it to a stop.

"Are you very afraid of the cold?"

Nihuang asked softly, watching as he tightened the fur robe around himself.

"Yes...I cannot stand the cold...."

"He never used to fear the cold before, everyone called him 'the little fireball',"

Nihuang's face was pale, her eyes still brimming with tears.

"What cruelty is this, that can remove the very scars from a person's skin, and turn such a robust young man into someone so afraid of the cold...."

"Nihuang..." Mei Changsu's expression was still tranquil, his voice low. "What you have seen is already enough, do not imagine any more. If you let your imagination run wild, you will create much pain for yourself – pain that is not yours to face or bear. Lin Shu is dead, it is enough for you to believe this...."

“But a woman’s intuition has always been this irrational,” Nihuang gazed into his face, her tears falling thick and fast. “Even if there aren’t any scars or marks, we can still know... perhaps, the fewer marks there were, the more certain I became.... Lin Shu gege, I’m sorry, I won’t leave you again, I will never, ever leave you again....”

“Silly child.” The corners of Mei Changsu’s eyes trembled as he drew his little girl into his embrace. “I know you miss Lin Shu gege, but that is not the same... time that has gone by, and a heart that was once stirred – they are like the waters of a river that has passed away, which can never reverse its flow. I have been tired for twelve years, and I don’t want to see the people important to me suffer any more for my sake, so, this way, my burden is greatly lightened as well, don’t you agree?”

Nihuang wrapped her arms tightly around his waist, her tears soaking into the front of his robes. For the past ten years, she had been the source of support and the pillar of strength for everyone else. Before her little brother and the army of the Southern border, she had always stood firm and unwavering. Even Nie Duo could not make her lower her barriers completely.

Only this person, only this embrace, could return her to the gentle innocence of her youth, as she gave in to her tears and allowed herself this one indulgence. She felt no burning passion or surge of desire, but only the soft warmth of trust, like sunlight in winter, as if she could close her eyes and become again that forever-innocent little girl, whom he had once borne on his back and carried, everywhere they went....

Putting aside their respective identities, putting aside the betrothal that had been decided by the grown ups, Lin Shu gege was still Lin Shu gege. No matter how many years pass, no matter how the world changes, even if, one day, they each fall in love and marry someone else, and even when their children have grown up and their own heads have grown white with age, Lin Shu gege will

still be her Lin Shu gege.

“Ni Huang, listen to me,” Mei Changsu held her quietly, gently stroking her hair. “Don’t ask me what happened all those years ago, one day, I will have Nie Duo tell you everything, but for now..... can you listen to me, and go back to the imperial Mu residence, and not tell anyone about our meeting today, not even Xia Dong or Prince Jing? If we meet again, I am still Su Zhe, and you are still the Princess, and no one can notice anything unusual, can you do that?”

Ni Huang wiped her face with her sleeve and gathered her composure, then nodded. “I know, the things you must do now are very difficult, I will not make this harder for you.”

Mei Changsu gave a small smile and reached out a hand to smooth down her tousled hair, saying softly, “After Qingming, go back to Yunnan, I will have Nie Duo go there as well, and the two of you can wait there quietly for my news, alright?”

“No,” Princess Ni Huang’s brow trembled. “Your strength in the capital is limited, at least I must stay to help you....”

“There are things you can do in Yunnan too,” Mei Changsu coaxed gently. “When I need your help, I will definitely call for you, because you are not an outsider, so we must work together.”

Ni Huang was silent for a long moment, then she nodded slowly. “Alright... if I return to Yunnan, I can take control of the situation there, and perhaps be of more use than if I stayed in the capital. And after I leave, all the power the imperial Mu residence holds in the capital is at your disposal.”

Mei Changsu gazed at her smilingly and praised, “You have truly gained much experience in these years. You have become perceptive and clear-minded, with a very accurate grasp of the situation in the court. With you in the South, much of my burden in the capital will be lightened.”

Nihuang looked at his pale, wan complexion and peaceful smile, and felt a rush of grief well up in her heart, but she did not want to upset him any further and so she forced it down and said, in a voice that trembled only a little, "Lin Shu gege, please take care...."

Mei Changsu patted her arm comfortingly, then pulled out a handkerchief, brushed aside the top layer of snow on the ground beside him, and wrapped some of the clean snow underneath in the handkerchief, making a cold pouch, which he then pressed against Nihuang's eyes, saying gently, "You are the fearsome lady commander of the army, you cannot return like this with your eyes all swollen...."

Nihuang smiled shakily and took the cold pouch from him, holding it against her eyes, the grief that had welled up subsiding somewhat. She watched as Mei Changsu drew the hand that had touched the snow back into his sleeve, his lips growing pale, and couldn't help saying worriedly, "Lin Shu gege, you must be very cold, go back to your carriage and return to the city first. I will wait here awhile, and by the time Xiao Qing comes back from escorting Old Mister Zhou, my eyes will have recovered. Don't worry, he won't notice anything."

"If even Mu Qing could notice it, then that would be really something," Mei Changsu joked lightly. He really was starting to feel very cold indeed, and so spoke a few more words to Nihuang and then turned to walk back down the hill.

The guard who had been waiting at a distance immediately came forward, and, seeing his signal, understood and ran to shout for the driver to bring the carriage over. When it arrived, he lowered the foot stool, and helped Mei Changsu up into it.

Mei Changsu leaned against the side of the carriage, turning his head back to look at the hill, and when he saw Nihuang lift a hand to wave to him, still holding the cold pouch, he hurriedly raised his own arm in reply.

The carriage swayed gently and then lurched forward, and the heavy curtain was drawn, shutting out the hillside scenery as well as Princess Nihuang's gaze.

Mei Changsu only felt icy needles of pain pressing on his chest, and, unable to hold back any longer, he lifted his sleeve and coughed into it violently. When he finally managed to stop with much difficulty, the snowy white fabric of his sleeve was stained deep red.

“Chief!” The guard cried out, coming over to support his body.

“It's alright,” Mei Changsu smiled faintly. “The weather is too cold, after we get back, boil some hot water for me, and I will be fine after I warm up....”

Chapter 59: Gifts of Gratitude

After his victory over the Crown Prince in the court debate, all of Prince Yu's worries over Consort Yue's restored position vanished. In his excitement, this prince who was known for his great generosity naturally had to hand out gifts and rewards to his hardworking subordinates, especially Mei Changsu, who had worked quietly in the background without any recognition, and who had generated all of this success with only a single letter to the imperial Yu residence.

At first, Prince Yu sent some of his men over with boxes of gold and silver and bolts of silk and brocade, but these gifts did not even make it past the door of the Su residence before they were politely refused, the given explanation stating that there was no place to put them.

Prince Yu knew he had been foolish, this was a noble and virtuous scholar, so of course he would not accept such gaudy, tasteless gifts, so the next day, he personally selected a variety of pearls and treasures made by famous jewelers, each piece a unique and priceless work of art.

But not long after he sent them over, these too were returned, the Su servants claiming once again that there was no place to put them.

Seeing that jewelry was not this man's cup of tea, he decided that scholars must favour the elegant, and immediately chose several of his most treasured ancient scrolls of painting from his extensive collection, and though he felt a pang of regret in parting with them, he ordered his men to deliver them over for a third time.

To his dismay, the speed with which these were returned was no less than that of the two previous rounds of gifts, and he was told that, this time, the polite decline had claimed that there was no place to hang them.

When Prince Yu was told about the refusal of the third set of gifts, Qin Banruo happened to be by his side, and she covered her face with her sleeve and laughed quietly.

Prince Yu glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and immediately asked, “Why are you laughing?”

Qin Banruo’s eyes were shining as she sighed, “Your Highness is truly not as talented as the Princess Consort when it comes to choosing gifts.

You have tried so many times, but the gifts have still not gotten past the front doors.

Does Your Highness not know that gifts must be adapted to their recipients?”

“But this person is unfathomably deep, how am I suppose to know what he likes?

It’s not as if I have boxes and boxes of Li Chong’s manuscripts lying around my manor.....what, by your expression, do you know what he likes?”

Qin Banruo smiled sweetly and said, “Even for the most unfathomable of persons, one only has to analyze carefully their speech and manner in order to find some things they will like.

Let me prepare the gifts, and I guarantee that they will get past the door this time.”

Prince Yu knew that Qin Banruo was perceptive and wise, and so gave the matter over to her.

The next day, Qin Banruo prepared a box of new and curious toys, including a duck that could walk, a cat that could spin and other such novelties, all interesting in design and well-crafted, as well as impossible to find in the public markets, and had it sent over.

Sure enough, this time, the gifts passed through the front doors,

the box was opened, and the toys were given to Fei Liu.

The youth began playing with them delightedly in the back courtyard while Mei Changsu personally wrote a reply, and though it was not long, it was still a formal letter of thanks.

After Prince Yu received it, he was amazed, and couldn't help heaping words of praise onto Banruo.

Qin Banruo only smiled modestly and said, "This is only another way to please a person.

If you truly do not know what he likes, then you only have to pay attention to the person most important to him.

This youth by Su Zhe's side may be a bodyguard in name, but is in reality treated more like a beloved younger brother, and pleasing this child is naturally much simpler than trying to discern the thoughts of Su Zhe's heart."

Prince Yu smiled.

"Leave it to women to handle matters of the heart.

No one else in this manor would have been able to come up with an idea like yours."

Qin Banruo sighed, "But about Su Zhe himself, we truly know too little.

If we cannot understand what he is really trying to do, how can Your Highness harness him in the future?"

"That is precisely what I am worried about.

This Su Zhe is such a talent, I am finding him more and more valuable every day, but his thoughts are truly too deep to discern, and gives me a feeling that...although he is aiding me with his strategies at the moment, I do not think he is truly loyal to me...."

"But if he was the type of person to come as soon as he is called, and strive for glory and riches under Your Highness' favour, then he would not be the qilin prodigy."

Qin Banruo smiled sweetly.

“Acquiring and using people is Your Highness’ specialty, Banruo will not comment further.”

“But obtaining intelligence and information for my reference is your specialty.”

Prince Yu leaned slightly into the fragrance, and said lowly into her ear, “Pay close attention to everything about Mei Changsu, no matter how distant or insignificant, I want to know about it.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Qin Banruo bowed, and seeing Prince Yu rise and put on his cloak, asked hurriedly, “Is His Highness going out?”

“I am going to the Su residence.”

Qin Banruo was taken aback, and sat in silence for a moment.

“Although your gift was very good,” Prince Yu looked closely at this talented lady and smiled, “it is still not enough.

It may bring a smile to his face, but it will not be remembered in his heart.”

Understanding dawned in Qin Banruo’s gaze, and she bowed, saying, “Your Highness is indeed thoughtful, Banruo is ashamed of her unworthiness.”

Prince Yu reached out a hand to her and said warmly, “You do not need to say that.

I am going over personally not only to give my gratitude.

From the report of those who went to the Su residence, Su Zhe seems to have caught a chill, and is unwell.

I am going to visit him.”

“Take care, Your Highness, Banruo will leave as well.”

“Then let us leave together,” Prince Yu said teasingly.

“It’s always a pleasure to spend more time in the company of beautiful ladies.”

Qin Banruo smiled but did not reply, and stood to drape a heavy robe around herself.

The two strode out of the study side by side, and were walking along chatting with great pleasure when suddenly, as they were passing through the orchid garden, they happened to come across Princess Consort Yu.

“My lord.”

Princess Consort Yue handed the flowers she was holding to the serving girl beside her, and came forward to bow.

“What are you doing here?”

Prince Yu put a hand on her arm and raised her from her bow, looking around.

“Tea made from the melted ice water of orchid flowers is my lord’s favourite.

Yesterday, there was fresh snowfall, and so this morning, I thought to hurry to the snowdrifts to gather some of the flowers and the snow, to save them for my lord,”

Princess Consort Yue replied gently, smiling and nodding at Qin Banruo, who had knelt in greeting.

Prince Yu saw that her beautiful hands had turned red with cold from the time spent gathering orchid blossoms in the snow, and felt something stir in his heart.

He quickly grasped her hand in both of his and said softly, “Leave these matters to the servants, you do not need to come yourself.”

“The servants are not careful enough, I fear they would spoil the taste of the tea, and make my lord unhappy.”

A gentle smile played around the lips of Princess Consort Yu, and, seeing that Prince Yu was dressed for going out, she hurriedly

asked, “My lord and Miss Qin have some business to attend to outside?”

Then do not linger here, I have already gathered several blossoms, and have nearly finished.”

“I am going out to visit a friend who is sick, Miss Qin was just returning to her house.”

Prince Yu didn’t know why he was explaining this to her.

“The wind is cold here, return quickly to your rooms.

The new year is approaching, and it would not do for you to fall sick.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Princess Consort Yu turned obediently and ordered her serving girl to gather up the blossoms, and then reached out a hand to neaten the ties of Prince Yu’s cloak as she said quietly, “Then I will return to my rooms.

My lord, Miss Qin, take care.”

“Ng,” Prince Yu answered uncomfortably, watching as she turned and left, and as he continued on with Qin Banruo, for some reason, he did not feel much like speaking.

At the door of the manor, they each went their own way.

Qin Banruo, who had walked a few steps behind him since they had met Princess Consort Yu, looked calm as she came forward to see Prince Yu off in his carriage.

She had just turned to step onto her own palanquin and was about to leave when a serving girl suddenly ran out from the gate of the manor, a vase of flower blossoms clutched in her hand, shouting, “Miss Qin, please wait!”

Qin Banruo hurriedly stopped the palanquin and pulled aside the curtain, leaning out.

“What is it?”

“My lady the Princess Consort invites Miss to taste this year’s fresh snow.”

Qin Banruo was surprised, but the clear, beautiful face showed no sign of disturbance as she smiled and said, “This is snow from orchid blossoms picked by the Princess Consort’s own hand, how could I dare tk refuse?”

Please tell the Princess Consort, Banruo is honoured to receive her gift, and will return another day to bring my gratitude to her properly.”

The serving girl widened her eyes, and who knew if she would really remember to convey the message, but she handed over the vase before running back into the manor.

Qin Banruo held the small vase, her finger tracing along its icy pattern idly, her face expressionless, staring for a moment before she lowered the curtain and ordered the palanquin to leave.

When Prince Yu arrived at the Su residence, Mei Changsu had just awoken from a nap, and was looking frail and weak.

His hospitality towards this honoured guest was also not as generous as it had been previously, and he only exchanged a few polite words before drinking his tea silently.

Since Prince Yu had come to visit him out of concern for his health, and had known he was ill, he of course did not find it strange, but inquired after his well-being warmly and offered to bring a physician over to treat him.

“It is only a little sore throat and stuffed nose, it will be better with some herbal medicine, there is no need to trouble the imperial physician.”

Mei Changsu leaned on his chair, which was filled with soft pillows, his eyes half-closed as he said, “Your Highness has come personally to visit me, I must apologize for the trouble I have

caused you.”

“You are really too courteous.

I have gained much recently as a result of your wise advice, but have not been able to meet your tastes with my gifts of gratitude, and though I have been wanting to convey my thanks to you, I have not been able to express them adequately,”

Prince Yu said modestly.

“The weather is turning cold, and one cannot be too careful in this season.

Your health is not good, you should have a physician staying in your residence to look after your health.”

Mei Changsu turned to him and smiled. “I thank Your Highness for your concern.

Your Highness is astute indeed, the elders of our Alliance sent over Physician Yan just yesterday, and though he is not young, he is much more robust than I.

He is also long-winded, and enjoys ordering people around, does Your Highness not see that I have been confined here today by his command?”

Prince Yu looked at him, so firmly wrapped in so many layers of clothing, and couldn’t help smiling.

“The esteemed physician is truly concerned for you.”

Mei Changsu smiled and did not reply, his gaze drifting over to the window.

Prince Yu followed his gaze to where Fei Liu was leaping about in the snow of the empty courtyard, once in a while extending a foot to nudge a wooden toy duck, which was waddling around aimlessly.

In the corridor behind him, the other servants of the manor were bustling about busily.

Prince Yu thought back to the renovated courtyard he had seen when he entered.

People had been walking around hanging up lanterns and decorations, and in one corner, a cart was delivering vegetables and fish and other products to the manor, and he felt a slight sense of bafflement arising in his heart.

Was this Su residence really looking as if it meant to stay in the capital for some time?

He was just about to speak when Fei Liu's figure suddenly flashed by, and in the next moment, he was pinning a manservant, who looked to be about twenty years old, down onto the ground in the snow.

"Fei Liu, let him go, that person has come looking for His Highness Prince Yu...."

A middle-aged man shouted, hurrying over from one side.

It was then that Prince Yu recognized the servant from his own manor, and he raised an eyebrow, a sense of foreboding welling up in his heart.

What urgent matter had arisen that he had come to this place looking for him?

In the next instant, the person was scrambling up from the snow and running towards him, plunging to the floor in a bow as he tried to catch his breath.

"Steady yourself, why are you in such a panic?"

Prince Yu eyed Mei Changsu, feeling as if he had lost some face before him, and said, "Who sent you here?"

"The Princess...Princess Consort...."

"The Princess Consort?"

Prince Yu knew very well that his wife had always paid much attention to propriety and etiquette, and did not easily overreact,

and so immediately stood up and asked, “What has happened in the palace?”

“The Princess Consort sent this one to find my lord,”
the servant swallowed hard.

“She begs my lord to enter the palace immediately, the lady Empress...the lady Empress has fallen ill!”

Prince Yu shuddered, terror rising up within him, and he swayed for a moment before grabbing the servant, meaning to ask him more questions, but realized that he would not get much information out of him and so threw him aside before hurriedly turning to Mei Changsu to say quickly, “Please take care, I must first take my leave!”

He did not even wait for a reply before rushing out into the courtyard, his servant following behind him, hastily settling his heavy cloak around his shoulders as they walked.

“The Empress is ill?

At a time like this....”

Mei Changsu’s brows furrowed gently, looking a bit surprised, and he sank into deep thought for a long while before calling out loudly, “Is Li dage outside?”

“Chief,” the middle-aged guard appeared at the door.

“Do you have orders for me?”

“Has that Tong Lu from Mister Shisan’s place arrived?”

“He arrived with the vegetable cart and has been here awhile, but because Prince Yu came, he has been waiting in the outer courtyard.”

“Please bring him in.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mei Changsu leaned back against the soft pillows and closed his

eyes, his thoughts troubled.

The news Tong Lu was bringing should not be anything unexpected, but as for the palace...he had not expected more trouble to arise.

He wondered whether the Empress was truly ill, or whether she had some hidden plans in mind.

If she was truly sick, could she recover within five days?

And if the Empress could not recover in time, then who would replace her in the sacrificial rites?

He did not have enough information, and Mei Changsu only felt his head ache and his cheeks burn, and he raised a hand to feel his forehead, but found that it was not very hot.

He was only a little dizzy, and his thoughts a little blurry.

His own bout of illness had arrived at an inconvenient time as well....

Chapter 60: Tong Lu

A few minutes later, Li Gang returned with a robust young man in his twenties, dressed in coarse hemp clothing, who came and bowed to Mei Changsu, saying, “Tong Lu greets the Chief.”

Tong Lu came from a farming background, but because his younger sister had caught the eye of a tyrant, their whole family had fallen into calamity, and had only been saved by the fortuitous intervention of Jiangzuo Alliance.

Now, his mother and younger sister were in Lang province, but as he himself was quick and capable as well as tenacious in character, Mei Changsu had noticed his abilities a few years ago and sent him to Jinling.

Mister Shisan was well-known in the entertainment industry and so could not move about easily, and so the clever and reliable Tong Lu became messenger in his place, and came to the Su residence bringing his vegetables almost every other day.

“You’ve worked hard, sit down and let us talk.”

Mei Changsu waved a hand.

“Have there been new developments in the prison?”

“Yes, sir.”

Tong Lu spoke quickly and clearly.

“They have already found a suitable person.

Everything was arranged by Qi Min’s most loyal subordinate, a man called Wu Xiaoyi.

The person is now being held at Wu Xiaoyi’s home, and really does resemble He Wenxin in seven to eight parts, and is only a bit too thin, and so is currently being stuffed with wine and good food.

He Wenxin has also suffered a bit in the prison, and so doesn’t look as white and plump as he used to, and so when the time comes

and his head strikes the ground, I fear they will be able to pull off the trick.

The Earl of Wen could never have guessed they could have something like this up their sleeve, and besides he has never been very familiar with He Wenxin, and even if he came to the execution in person, he would not be able to see through the deception.”

“Ng,”

Mei Changsu murmured.

“Keep a very close eye on that Wu Xiaoyi, the family of the substitute, and the guards in the jail, but make sure we are not noticed.

After He Wenxin has been rescued from the prison, he will be immediately escorted out of the capital.

When that happens, you must not lose his trail under any circumstances, no matter what.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Previous cases of the Ministry of Justice secretly substituting prisoners on death sentence before their execution – how many have you found?”

“We have found seven cases with witnesses and evidence.”

“Keep working hard, we must obtain the most crucial witnesses.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell Gong Yu to pay attention to Qin Banruo.

Do not let her realize that we are investigating these old cases.”

“Yes, sir.”

After saying all this, Mei Changsu felt his gaze darken, and hurriedly closed his eyes for a brief rest.

He would let the Ministry of Appointments and the Ministry of

Justice enjoy their new year, and when the Spring Execution came around, the show would really begin.

He only hoped that this uncooperative body of his would not let him down when the time came.

“Chief....”

Tong Lu saw that he had turned pale, and was extremely worried, and asked in a small voice, “Should I call for Physician Yan?”

“No need... Physician Yan would only give me more medicine.”

Mei Changsu smiled, “It’s alright.

Does Mister Shisan have anything else to tell me?”

“Yes.

There is news from the Green Helms of the Canals and the Walkers Sect.

In the past few months, gunpowder has been making its way into the capital smuggled amidst other goods, delivered through various routes and by different businesses.

Although the amount is small each time, put together, there is already around two hundred jin.

The brothers of the Walkers sect are pretending not to have noticed anything, and have only reported it in secret to Mister Shisan, and Mister Shisan is now investigating whether there is any relationship between these businesses.

He will report any new developments to you.”

“A large quantity of gunpowder?”

Mei Changsu’s eyebrows rose.

“Is there any connection to the jiangnan Thunderbolt Office?”

“We have not discovered any connection yet.”

“Where is this gunpowder being stored after it enters the capital?”

Tong Lu lowered his head, looking ashamed.

“The people in charge of the delivery were too cautious and very cunning, and after the packages changed hands a few times, we actually lost the trail....”

Mei Changsu abruptly straightened in his chair.

“You mean, we do not know where this gunpowder is now?”

“Yes... in this matter of the gunpowder, it looked to be some jianghu conflict at first, and not anything related to us, and so Mister Shisan initially did not want to alarm you.

But now that the location of the gunpowder is unknown, and its purpose also unknown, and Chief, you are always moving about the city, we are afraid....”

“The capital is so large, would my luck really be that bad?”

Mei Changsu couldn't help smiling.

“Be vigilant in your investigation, but do not be overly worried either.”

“Yes, sir,” Tong Lu answered.

He rummaged in the folds of his clothing for a long while, and finally produced a little sable the size of a palm.

The little sable wagged its tail, then turned its head and, seeing Mei Changsu, jumped into his lap.

“Why have you brought this little sable?”

“Oh... Miss Gong Yu said this little sable should follow the Chief for the next few days,” Tong Lu, his head lowered.

“It is very sensitive towards gunpowder, and if it smells any, it will start squirming restlessly, so if the Chief brings it with him wherever he goes, Miss Gong Yu would not worry so much.”

Mei Changsu shook his head and couldn't help laughing, but he knew they all meant well, and seeing Tong Lu's expression, he knew he had probably been scolded severely by Gong Yu for losing the gunpowder's trail, and didn't to make any more trouble for him, so he nodded and replied, "Alright, the little sable is very obedient, it can stay for a few days."

Tong Lu's face lit up in a smile, and he clasped his fist in a bow.

"Thank you, Chief!"

"What are you thanking me for?"

Mei Changsu waved a hand smilingly.

"Alright, you can go back and tell Mister Shisan.....and Miss Gong Yu, I have almost fully recovered, they can stop reporting back to Lang province about my health...."

"Ah..."

Tong Lu's face was pale.

"We didn't...."

Mei Changsu didn't listen, and closed his eyes to rest, and so Tong Lu didn't dare continue, but retreated quietly, making a face to himself.

The little sable crawled up to Mei Changsu's shoulder and kneaded his ear with its tiny claws, but there was no response, and so it crawled back down into the folds of his robes and promptly fell asleep.

Two fingers suddenly reached over and plucked up the little sable by its ear, dangling it in mid-air, and the little animal twisted furiously, its stubby little legs flailing as it squeaked in protest.

Mei Changsu opened his eyes, and said warmly, "Fei Liu, what's the matter?"

"Those three!"

“Oh,” Mei Changsu rubbed his temples for a moment, then gathered himself and said, “Bring them in.”

“Alright!”

Fei Liu let go, and the little sable fell into Mei Changsu’s lap, and although it was not hurt, it was nonetheless quite frightened and curled into a ball, shivering and squeaking.

“There, there, don’t be scared, Fei Liu likes you....”

Mei Changsu patted it with a smile, then tucked it into the folds of his sleeve once more.

“Tonight, you can sleep with Fei Liu, how about that?”

It was a good thing the little sable could not understand him, as it continued to stare at him with its black, beady eyes, or it would have fainted away in fear.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor, varied in their strength and rhythm, just like the characters of their owners.

“Brother Su, are you feeling better?”

Yan Yujin was of course the first to speak.

“I brought back several baskets of the freshest citrus fruits from Lingnan, they can help to soothe the bitter taste you get in your mouth when you get sick.”

“Stop making so much noise,” Xiao Jingrui shoved at him, frowning.

He looked at Mei Changsu’s pale complexion and said worriedly, “Brother Su, you don’t need to get up, just stay seated.

Getting sick at this time of year is no small matter, has the physician’s medicine helped?”

“I am almost recovered, I’m sorry to have bothered you three to have come all this way to visit me.”

Mei Changsu gave a small smile.

“Come and sit, I haven’t had a chance to talk to you in such a long time.”

The three came forward and sat down in nearby chairs.

Suddenly, the little sable began squirming around in the folds of Mei Changsu’s robes, its little claws raking around furiously, and Mei Changsu felt his heart leap.

“The hot springs were really so comfortable, Brother Su, you should go give them a try, they would be very beneficial for your health.”

As Yan Yujin spoke, he took out several tangerines from his sleeve and placed them on the table.

“The other baskets have been brought around to the back, I just took a few for you to try.

The skin is thin and easy to peel, and the fruit is juicy and sweet, Brother Su, I’m sure you will like it.

I’m planning to plant a few of their trees in my own courtyard....”

“Citrus fruits only grow in the south, in the north, they will grow nothing more than thorns,” Xie Bi rolled his eyes.

“Have you studied anything?

If you tried to plant any at your home, you might end up harvesting bitter melons instead....”

Xiao Jingrui and Mei Changsu both laughed, the latter reaching out a hand to take a tangerine.

He held it in front of his nose and sniffed gently.

Beneath the crisp sweetness, there was the faintest whiff of sulfur, detectable only with very careful examination.

Mei Changsu thought he knew the reason for this.

“These tangerines are very fresh, have they really come all the

way from Lingnan?

They must have come by boat, then?”

“That’s right, they came directly from Lingnan by official vessels via the Fu river, and do not have to stop along the way for inspections, and so naturally travel much faster than ordinary transport vessels.

Many of the imperial households in the capital like this kind of tangerine, and ten whole vessels of the fruit were divided up so quickly, it was a good thing my dad ordered some in advance, or we wouldn’t have been able to grab any.”

“So that’s how it is...then I must really thank your great kindness.”

Mei Changsu spoke politely while his mind worked quickly.

So besides the Green Helms and the Walkers, even the official vessels were secretly smuggling gunpowder into the city.

An ordinary jianghu quarrel shouldn’t be able to do something like this....

The little sable moved about restlessly in his robes, and Mei Changsu reached up and patted it comfortingly, and, probably because the smell of gunpowder was very faint, it settled down finally and went back to sleep.

“Brother Su, are your hands cold?

Do you want me to help you peel it?”

Xiao Jingrui asked concernedly, looking at Mei Changsu, who was holding the tangerine very still in his hand.

“.....Oh, no need, Yujin is right, this skin is very easy to peel.”

Mei Changsu quickly peeled the golden yellow skin and put a slice of the fruit into his mouth.

As he bit, the cool juice filled his mouth, a perfect mix of sweet

and sour.

“Is it good?”

Yan Yujin asked with his mouth full.

“It feels so great to sit here by the fire, all warm, and eating these tangerines.”

“Look at you, Brother Su has only eaten one bite, and you’re already on your second tangerine.”

Xie Bi teased, “Are you planning to finish that basket before you go back?”

“They’re good!”

Yan Yujin ignored his teasing and turned to Mei Changsu.

“If Brother Su likes them, I can send a few more baskets over.”

“These will be enough, we don’t have many people, and most of them only like eating meat anyway.

But tangerines are Fei Liu’s favourite, so I will thank you for him first.”

Yan Yujin looked around.

“Fei Liu was just here, where did he go?”

“Probably to the back courtyard to play.”

Mei Changsu looked at this son of the Imperial Uncle and suddenly thought of something, and said nonchalantly, as if casually continuing the conversation, “How did you have the time to come visit me today?

With the lady Empress ill, shouldn’t you be visiting her in the palace?”

“The lady Empress is ill?”

The shock on Yan Yujin’s face looked genuine.

“No way, I was in the palace just yesterday, she looked fine then,

how could she be sick today?”

“Perhaps she has caught a cold from the weather,”

Mei Changsu smiled faintly.

“The weather is so cold, if one is not careful, it is easy to catch a chill in the night.

But there are so many people in the palace to look after her, the Empress will surely recover quickly.”

“Oh.....”

Yan Yujin looked up at the sky.

“It is too late now, I will go visit her tomorrow.

If she is indeed badly ill, I will have to send a message to Dad and ask him to come back for a visit.”

“Oh?

The Imperial Uncle is not in the city?”

“He has gone to the Daoist temples outside the city to offer sacrifices.

My dad doesn’t pay any attention to palace affairs these days, and only cares about his Daoist rituals.

If he didn’t have me around as a son, he would definitely have turned our home into a Daoist temple as well,”

Yan Yujin grumbled helplessly.

“But I guess the good thing is that no one’s around to pay attention to me, so I can do anything I please.

Aside from a brief spell earlier when my dad suddenly wanted to shove me into Forbidden Dragon Army to serve as a messenger, he’s never paid much attention to my future.”

“For the son of a noble family like you, the future has never been anything worth worrying about,” Xie Bi said.

“But your dad is really becoming more and more distant, this whole year, he hasn’t even entered the palace more than once or twice, and this time, does he not even know about the Empress?”

“I don’t know....”

Yan Yujin scratched his head.

“You now as well as I do the two of them were never close, my dad likes quiet and medication, and if it were not for the fact that our ancestral shrines are in the capital, he would probably want to move to the mountains.”

Xiao Jingrui added, “If the two of you didn’t look so alike, who could tell you were father and son?”

Uncle Yan is mild and peaceful, like a crane leisurely surfing the wind above an open field, whereas you, you run towards excitement and trouble, to say nothing of the manner of a crane, you are more like a stray cat!”

“Yes, the young master Xiao has a noble manner,” Yan Yujin said with a shrug.

“I am a stray cat, and you are the well-behaved domestic cat, happy?”

Mei Changsu couldn’t hold back a laugh.

“It’s been so long since I heard the two of you bickering like this, what a familiar feeling.”

Chapter 61: Morning Wine

As they talked and laughed, it was as if they had returned to the early days of their friendship, when there had been no walls raised between their hearts.

The time passed quickly, and before they knew it, it was getting dark.

Mei Changsu brought out wine and invited them to stay, and the three did not decline, so the room filled with pleasant chatter as they talked about everything under the sun, except for politics and court affairs.

The wine was a strong brew from the north, and scorched its way down the throat.

Yan Yujin cried out, "This is wine fit for a man to drink!" and downed a large cup in one go before choking and gasping with pain.

Comparatively, the two brothers of the Xie family behaved in a much more civilized manner, and although he had a great taste and an impressive tolerance for wine, Xie Bi only sipped from a small cup slowly.

At some point in time, Fei Liu had appeared in the room, and he was now peering curiously at the liquid on the table.

"Xiao Fei Liu...."

Yan Yujin was a little drunk, and did not mind the cold air around Fei Liu, but held up a cup of wine and beckoned to him.

"Have you tried this before?"

"It's very good...."

"Don't play around with him,"

Mei Changsu, who had been drinking soup because of his illness, laughed and stopped him hurriedly.

“Our Fei Liu is still young.”

“I started drinking wine when I was fourteen, what are you afraid of?”

Fei Liu is a boy, and if he doesn’t learn to drink, he will never become a man.”

Yan Yujin carelessly waved him over.

“Come come come, come try a cup.”

Fei Liu looked at Su gege, and seeing that he was smiling and did not seem inclined to stop him, he came forward, accepted the cup, and took a sip.

His mouth filled with the prickling of tiny needles, and smoke seemed to rise up from his head.

“Tastes bad!”

Fei Liu, feeling that he had been tricked, flung the cup down and hurled himself towards Yan Yujin fist-first.

The son of the Imperial Uncle shoved the table aside and jumped up to dodge his attack, and the two began flying around the room in a frenzy.

At first, Xiao Jingrui was worried, but when he saw that Fei Liu was only chasing him around to let out his fury, and had no intention of really hurting him, he finally relaxed.

“Ever since I came to Jinling, Fei Liu has not had much opportunity to play like this,”

Mei Changsu was smiling.

“So every time you come over, he is really very happy.”

Xiao Jingrui had never felt that Fei Liu was happy to see them, but it was true that this residence seemed a bit empty and quiet, and so he couldn’t help asking, “Brother Su, will you only have these few in your household around for the new year?”

“For new year’s eve, yes, this is about it.

But on the third or fourth day of the new year, I will invite some guests over, you will come too, right?”

“I will come anytime,”

Xiao Jingrui looked at Fei Liu, then looked at Mei Changsu, and said sadly, “But if there is only the two of you here for new year’s eve, that would really be too lonely.

Come to my home for the new year, my Zhuo dad and his family will be in the capital too, and it will be very lively.”

“Thank you,” Mei Changsu smiled at him warmly.

“But whoever said it would only be the two of us around?

Didn’t you see when you came in, there were at least twenty people in the courtyard?”

“But those people...aren’t family....”

“Are you saying the people in your esteemed manor are my family?”

Mei Changsu had inadvertently spoken a little too sharply, but he realized that he had overreacted and softened his tone.

“New year’s eve is a time for family to gather, your entire family will be there, what place would I have?

Besides, the head of the imperial Ning household is your father, it wouldn’t be appropriate for you to invite an outsider into your family gathering without his approval.”

Xiao Jingrui had spoken on impulse without much thought, and on hearing this, he knew he had been rude, and so he lowered his head and said, “Brother Su is right.”

“What silly things have you said now that Brother Su had to teach you a lesson?”

Yan Yujin had returned to his seat after his exercise around the

room, and had caught the last sentence.

“Jingrui means well, and was worried that Fei Liu and I would be lonely during new year’s eve.”

Mei Changsu smiled faintly, as if wanting to let the topic pass by unheeded.

“You didn’t invite Brother Su to your home for new year’s, did you?”

Yan Yujin had shot the arrow through the bulls’ eye on the first try, and he leaned over and knocked his fist against Xiao Jingrui’s forehead.

“Do you have any brains?”

“Older Brother just forgot to consider all the different aspects.”

Xie Bi had always gotten along well with Xiao Jingrui, and after he had discovered the truth behind their father’s deception of him, he had relied totally on his older brother’s comfort and support, and so of course he leapt to his defense now.

“You may have brains, but don’t you waste them all on food and pleasure anyway?”

Yan Yujin shook his head.

“Brother Su has never liked excitement, and anyway, there is Fei Liu to keep him company, if you’re going to feel bad for anyone, feel bad for me, every year, as soon as the bows to the ancestors have been completed, I’ll be left at home all alone....”

Mei Changsu asked curiously, “And your father?”

“He goes back to his room to meditate.”

Mei Changsu was taken aback.

Old Master Yan and Yan Yujin’s mother had both passed away, and he did not have any brothers or sisters, so if his father really left him to go meditate in his room, this child who so loved

excitement must be left feeling lonely indeed....

“Why are you fishing for sympathy?”

Xie Bi scolded him with a smile.

“You’ve always been a carefree little playboy, aren’t you happier without your dad around telling you what to do?

You spend your time in fragrant parlours surrounded by crowds of beautiful ladies, how could you be lonely?”

Mei Changsu lifted his tea cup, breathing in its clean fragrance, and sighed in his heart.

Xie Bi was, in the end, a child who had grown up under the sheltered wings of his family, and had never experienced true loneliness his whole life.

How could the clamour and excitement of romantic parlours compare to the warmth and love of a home and family?

Yan Yujin did not refute Xie Bi’s words, his ever-present smile still lingering on his lips, as if he took nothing to heart.

“Brother Su, do you want to come with me to the entertainment houses of Spiral Market Street this year?

Look, Fei Liu is almost grown up....”

To his surprise, Mei Changsu raised an eyebrow and answered, “Alright, I cannot go as I am still recovering, but you may bring Fei Liu with you.”

“Bring him all by myself?”

Yan Yujin jumped in fright.

“That won’t do.

What if he gets angry when the ladies touch him, who would be able to hold him back?”

“He wouldn’t, our Fei Liu has a very good temper,” Mei Changsu smiled.

“After you have offered the sacrifices to your ancestors, come over here to my place and we can have some wine together, and afterwards, you can take Fei Liu out to play.

This year, we are not in Lang province, and I have just gotten sick, so Fei Liu must be feeling a little out of sorts.”

“Tingsheng!” Fei Liu suddenly shouted.

“You want to bring Tingsheng out to play?”

Mei Changsu stroked the youth’s hair.

“Ng!”

“Tingsheng...this name is very familiar, where have I heard it before....”

Yan Yujin scratched his head.

“He is one of the three children who defeated Baili Qi,” Xiao Jingrui remembered very clearly.

“After he was released from the Secluded Court, he was taken in by Prince Jing to be his bodyguard, right?”

“That’s right, all three of the children are at the imperial Jing residence now.”

Mei Changsu nodded.

“They should be able to come out if they ask for a holiday from their commanding officer, right?”

“I think it should be alright,” Yan Yujin said loyally.

“They were saved by you, after all, and when the time comes, I will go to pick them up in your place, and see if anyone dares to refuse to let them out.”

“Thank you,”

Mei Changsu turned back to Fei Liu.

“Is there anyone else you want to invite?”

Fei Liu thought seriously for a moment.

“Big Uncle!”

“The big uncle can’t come, the big uncle has his own family, he has to stay with them for the new year.”

“Which big uncle?”

Xie Bi asked.

“The first person in this city who defeated Fei Liu in a fight.”

“Commander Meng?!”

The three young men were shocked.

Yan Yujin looked at Fei Liu and shook his head.

“From a little criminal slave to the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, I think you are the only one in the whole world with such a strange guest list.”

“In Fei Liu’s eyes, there is only like and dislike, what does he care about distinctions in rank and identity?”

Mei Changsu said.

“Isn’t it more simple like this?”

“It’s too bad there aren’t many who can see the world like this...”

Xiao Jingrui sighed lightly.

“Identity is like a person’s second skin, and if it is torn, I fear he would be changed beyond all recognition....”

Mei Changsu’s brow furrowed, as if some thought had arisen from these words, and his face was a bit pale, as his unfathomably deep gaze turned towards Xiao Jingrui.

“Alright!”

Yan Yujin stretched lazily and jumped up.

“Good wine should satisfy the spirit, but it should not bring too much joy, or everything that comes afterwards will seem bland by

comparison.

I see that you've all grown a bit melancholy after a few drinks, and if we keep drinking, are you going to start weeping and singing sad ballads?

Brother Su looks tired, it's time for us to go back."

"You're right."

Xiao Jingrui stood up as well.

"Brother Su is still ill, so you should rest more to recover.

We have disturbed you for so long, it is time for us to leave."

Because he was indeed a bit tired, and because of the nameless grief and melancholy that had arisen as a result of Xiao Jingrui's words, Mei Changsu felt his emotions had been aroused and that he needed some time alone to settle them, and so he did not ask them to stay, but quietly invited them to visit again another time, and prepared to rise to see them out.

"The wind is strong and it seems to be snowing again, Brother Su, you don't need to come out."

Xiao Jingrui hurriedly helped him into a chair.

"You don't need to be polite with the three of us, we are all friends here.

Take good care, Brother Su, and we will come see you again soon."

Mei Changsu smiled and did not insist, but called Fei Liu over to see them out instead, then leaned back against his pillows, preparing to close his eyes for a rest.

Perhaps it was because this day had been too tiring, soon, his mind grew muddled and confused, as he drifted in and out of a restless sleep, his whole body burning with heat one moment and then seeming to be soaked in ice water down to the bone in the next, as he tossed and turned for what seemed like an endless

amount of time before he felt a sudden pain twist around his heart, and his whole body jumped as he awoke abruptly, opening his eyes to see three faces peering down at him from above.

“What are you all doing here?”

Mei Changsu looked around and discovered that he was lying on his bed, already dressed in his sleeping robes and wrapped in a soft blanket.

“You fainted and have been unconscious the whole night, don’t you know?” Physician Yan stroked his white beard furiously.

“Look out the window, the sun is already up, are you trying to scare us all to death?”

“.....ah?I didn’t feel anything much, and I feel quite alright now.....”

Mei Changsu tried to sit up from the pillows, but Fei Liu wrapped his arms around him, and so he could only fall back onto the bed, as he patted the youth’s back comfortingly.

“Fei Liu, don’t be scared, Su gege was just sleeping, help me up, alright?”

“You still want to get up?”

Physician Yan thundered.

“If I let you get up from your bed before three days has passed, my name is not Yan!”

“Physician Yan, that won’t do, these few days are very busy, there are many things that must be done....”

“I don’t care, I made a bet when I came to take over your care, and if you keep acting like this, I’m going to lose!”

Mei Changsu was going to tell him that he had special pills made by Doctor Xun Zhen that would prevent any great problems from arising if he took them regularly, but he was afraid there might be some disagreements between doctors, and that he would only

make things worse if he brought it up, so he didn't say any more, but lay down again under the fire of the elderly gentleman's wrath, turning his head to Fei Liu to say, "Can you recognize Uncle Meng's home?"

"Recognize!"

"Go ask Uncle Meng to come over for a visit, will you? And go secretly, don't let anyone see you, alright?"

"Alright!"

Fei Liu saw that he was awake and looked as he always did, and so his simple heart was immediately reassured, unlike Physician Yan and Li Gang, who were standing to one side.

Having received his orders, he immediately flew out the door.

"Li dage, I must trouble you to send a message to Mister Shisan for me, and ask him to investigate all the official vessels which have docked at the harbour recently to see whether they have any connection to the gunpowder smuggling."

"Yes, sir!"

Li Gang was his subordinate in Jiangzuo Alliance and did not dare to defy him the way Physician Yan was doing, so although he was also extremely worried, he too did not say any more, but immediately left to carry out his orders.

"Are you done making noise?"

Physician Yan grabbed his wrist roughly and began feeling his pulse, frowning for a long moment, then took his other wrist and felt it again, then peered under his eyelids and looked at his tongue.

He did not say anything about the course of his illness, only lecturing scoldingly about young people these days who didn't know how to take care of their bodies, and how a person's health was the most important thing, and how he had to keep his mind

and spirit calm and avoid any excitement....

Mei Changsu watched him quietly, not saying half a word of protest, and from his expression, looked to be listening very seriously indeed.

But even Physician Yan himself knew in his heart that the mind of this diligent young patient of his had long since turned to other matters....

Chapter 62: Doubts and Suspicions in the Palace

When Meng Zhi finished his shift in the palace and returned to the commander's residence, he felt something wrong as soon as he entered his room, and although he continued casually changing out of his palace uniform and into normal clothes, his whole body was stiff with tension, like a cheetah on the alert, preparing to defend against an attack at any moment.

But he quickly understood that the reason he had so quickly identified the presence of his uninvited guest was because that person had not bothered hiding from him.

“Very slow!”

The youth who drifted down from the beams of the roof had an unhappy look on his face.

“What very slow?”

Meng Zhi was not Mei Changsu, and couldn't understand Fei Liu's patterns of thought.

“I was very slow to return, or very slow in changing?”

“Both!”

Meng Zhi laughed loudly, and swiftly tied on his belt.

“Xiao Fei Liu, did you come by yourself?”

“Ng!”

“To do what?”

To practice martial arts with me?”

“Call you!”

“Call me?”

Meng Zhi thought for a moment.

“You mean, your Su gege is calling me over?”

“Ng!”

Meng Zhi was suddenly worried.

A few days ago, he had heard that Su Zhe had fallen ill, and had been just about to go over for a visit when Mei Changsu sent a messenger over to say that it was nothing serious, and that he should not visit so frequently, and so he had restrained himself.

Now that Fei Liu had been sent purposefully just to call him over, he was afraid that the illness might have taken a turn for the worse, and asked hurriedly, “How is your Su gege doing?”

“Sick!”

“I know he is sick, but how is he doing?”

“Sick!”

Fei Liu repeated himself unhappily, finding this uncle really a bit slow, since he had already answered the question once.

Meng Zhi shook his head helplessly, and knew in his heart that Fei Liu wouldn't be of much help, and so quickly gathered his things and hurried out the door, jumping into his saddle and riding swiftly away towards the Su residence.

As soon as he entered the front gates, someone came forward to take his horse, and Meng Zhi strode directly into the inner courtyard, rushing straight into Mei Changsu's room.

The room's owner sat on a heated brick bed, wrapped snugly in his furs, holding a bowl of steaming medicinal soup in his hands as he sipped it slowly, and though his face was a bit pale, he looked otherwise rather well.

“Xiao Shu, are you alright?”

Mei Changsu half-rose out of his chair, gesturing with an arm.

“Meng dage, please sit, I'm alright, I only caught a chill, and the

physician wants me to sweat it out.”

“You really gave me a fright.”

Meng Zhi finally let out a sigh of relief.

“I thought you called me over so urgently because something had happened to you. What’s the matter then?”

Mei Changsu placed his empty bowl onto the table beside him, then accepted the cup of tea Meng Zhi handed to him and took a swallow to rinse his mouth, before asking, “I hear the Empress is unwell?”

Meng Zhi stared at him.

“News certainly travels to you quickly.

She just fell sick yesterday, and apparently it came on very suddenly.

But I cannot enter the Inner Palace unless I am guarding the Emperor, and so I am not too clear about the details.

I only spoke to the imperial physician briefly when he came out, and he said it isn’t anything serious.”

Mei Changsu’s brow furrowed, as if there was something he didn’t understand.

“When they brought the news to Prince Yu, he was with me here, and if it was really only a trivial illness, they should not have been in such a panic....”

“It’s probably because it came on so suddenly, and so it appeared to be serious at first glance, and everyone made a bit of a fuss.”

Meng Zhi thought for a moment.

“According to the imperial physician, it is not life-threatening.”

“Why she fell sick, and how long it will take her to recover – did you ask about these?”

“Oh....”

Meng Zhi scratched his head, embarrassed.

“I didn’t know you would want to know about these, and so didn’t ask especially....”

Mei Changsu murmured to himself, then said, “How about this, Meng dage, you can use the excuse of paying a visit to Princess Nihuang to enter the palace and investigate a bit more, and find a way to bring me a copy of the imperial physician’s prescription.

You might also be able to glean some news from Princess Jingning.....as for Prince Yu, don’t worry about him, I will remind him to pay careful attention to the Empress’ food and drink....”

“Are you suspecting that the Empress’ illness is man-made?”

Mei Changsu nodded.

“It is too much of a coincidence, I cannot rest until I investigate the matter thoroughly.”

“If anyone wanted to poison the Empress, Consort Yue and the Crown Prince should be at the top of that list....”

“You are not wrong, but there are still several ways in which this conclusion does not make sense.”

Mei Changsu wrinkled his brow.

“First, it is precisely because they are the most likely suspects that they are the least likely to succeed.

In all these years that the Empress has been in the palace, her most important task has been to compete with Consort Yue, and so she is always extremely alert and careful around her, and if Consort Yue could not accomplish something like this at the height of her power, then it would be simply impossible for her to succeed now.

Besides, the Empress’ illness this time is not life-threatening, and if this were really the work of the Crown Prince and Consort Yue, surely they would not have acted so half-heartedly, if they had the

chance to poison her, they would definitely have poisoned her to death, what would be the point in simply making her sick for a few days?”

“Perhaps their goal is simply to prevent the Empress from participating in the sacrificial rites, so that Consort Yue can take her place....”

“What good could come of that?”

There is no practical gain to be had, only a soothing of their anger from losing the debate.

If they had the chance to make the Empress sick, why not kill her outright and reap the benefits in the long run?

Not to mention, don't forget that Consort Yue has only been restored to consort, but not imperial Noble Consort, and currently in the palace, Gracious Consort Xu and Moral Consort Chan both rank above her, and although these two ladies have only birthed princesses and so have never dared to compete for power in the palace, they currently outrank Consort Yue in both name and years, and so who is to say Consort Yue would be the one to replace the Empress in the sacrificial rites?”

“Then.....you mean to say, the Crown Prince and Consort Yue are innocent this time?”

Mei Changsu sighed quietly.

“It is too early to draw any conclusions now.

Perhaps there is some benefit to replacing the Empress in this year's sacrificial rites that I have not thought of.....or perhaps the Empress has truly just happened to fall ill.....there are too many possibilities, and therefore I require more information.”

“But there are only a few days left until the year end's sacrificial rites....”

“So we must make the most of this opportunity....”

Mei Changsu's expression was serious as he pressed his fingers against his temples.

"I have a feeling that there is some secret going on behind all of this..."

Meng Zhi immediately stood up.

"I will go and investigate for you right away."

"Thank you, Meng dage."

Mei Changsu raised his head and smiled at him.

"Let me know immediately if there is any news."

Meng Zhi had always been a man of action, and so he only answered, "Right," before turning to leave.

Mei Changsu let out a long sigh and leaned back against his pillows, falling into deep thought again.

He felt an exhaustion in his mind and spirit, as he began to grow light-headed and a little dizzy, and so to preserve his energy for later, he forced himself to stop thinking, to let go of the complex thoughts in his mind and enter into sleep instead.

However, he could not sleep very deeply, and only drifted dazedly in and out of consciousness, as the time passed by unheeded, and when he finally opened his eyes again, it was noon.

He could not sleep any more even if he wanted to, and so Mei Changsu wrapped his furs around himself and sat up, ate a bowl of the congee Physician Yan had prescribed, and picked up again his book of Confucian scriptures and began reading slowly.

Fei Liu sat beside him peeling tangerines, and quiet fell around them as the sound of the wind blew through the room.

There was no news from either Mister Shisan or Meng Zhi.

This was not surprising, since he had given his orders only a few hours ago, and some things were not so easily uncovered.

But for some reason, Mei Changsu still felt dimly that something outside of his expectation and control had occurred quietly, but when he concentrated and tried to understand what it was, it seemed to slip from between his fingers, neatly avoiding his grasp.

He was deep in thought when Li Gang's voice drifted in from the outer courtyard.

"Please, follow me this way."

Mei Changsu's brows leapt lightly.

Although someone had arrived, it could not be Meng Zhi, for whom he was waiting, and it was clearly not Tong Lu either.

That was because, if it had been either one of these two, Li Gang would not be leading the way for him with such courtesy and politeness.

"Fei Liu, go and bring that chair over here to Su gege's bed, alright?"

Fei Liu took the tangerines in his hands and crammed them all into his mouth, then obediently got up and moved the chair into the indicated position.

Just as he finished, the door to the room was pushed open, and Li Gang called from outside the door, "Chief, His Highness Prince Jing has come to ask after your health."

"Your Highness, please enter."

Mei Changsu said loudly.

Following his words, Xiao Jingyan strode into the room, but Li Gang did not enter, and had probably already retreated away.

"Mister Su, don't worry, no one saw me coming in here."

These were the first words out of Prince Jing's mouth.

"How is your health?"

You have been ill."

“It is nothing.

It is only because I have been instructed to undergo this sweating treatment, and so cannot get up, pray Your Highness forgive my discourtesy.”

Mei Changsu stretched out his hand and indicated the chair beside his bed.

“Your Highness, please sit.”

“Don’t worry about courtesy and discourtesy.”

Prince Jing took off his cloak and sat, and then immediately got to the point, saying, “You are investigating the matter of the Empress’ illness, is that right?”

Mei Changsu gave a small smile.

“How did Your Highness know?”

“By your calculating nature, I do not think you would let a single unexpected event slip by uninvestigated....”

“Does Your Highness also think the Empress’ illness this time is not an ordinary sickness?

“I do not think, I know.”

Prince Jing’s thin lip curled.

“That’s what I have come to tell you, the Empress has been poisoned by ruan hui grass.

Mei Changsu was mildly surprised.

“Ruan hui grass?

The ruan hui grass that makes a person weak in the limbs and diminishes one’s appetite, but whose effect wears off in six or seven days?”

“Correct.”

“Why is Your Highness so certain?”

Prince Jing looked calm, and his voice was steady as he said, “I entered the palace to visit Mother today, and she was the one who told me.

When the Empress fell ill, she was at Zhengyang palace with the other concubines and consorts on one of their routine visits, and she was standing not far from the Empress, and so saw the whole thing clearly.”

Mei Changsu’s gaze flashed, but he asked softly, “How did Concubine Jing realize that it was ruan hui grass?”

“Before Mother entered the palace, she often saw this type of herb and is familiar with its smell, as well as the symptoms it causes when ingested.”

Prince Jing looked at Mei Changsu’s expression.

“Perhaps you do not know that my mother was once a physician.

She will not be wrong.”

“Your Highness is mistaken, it is not that I do not trust Concubine Jing’s judgement, I was only thinking.....who would dare poison the Empress, and yet only use this kind of weak herb to do so?”

Mei Changsu frowned in quiet thought, a thin layer of sweat breaking out over his forehead, and in his worry, he had unconsciously begun rubbing a corner of the blanket between his fingers, so that the tips of his fingers were turning red with the exertion.

“It is not anything serious, why so troubled?” Prince Jing frowned at Mei Changsu’s expression, as if he couldn’t bear his worry. “And it is not only you and I who are investigating. Although Prince Yu does not know the reason for the Empress’ sickness, he has begun investigating this matter in the palace, and perhaps it will not be long before he finds the person responsible for the poisoning.”

Mei Changsu closed his eyes and smiled faintly. “Your Highness is correct, the worst that can happen is that the Empress will not be able to attend the sacrificial ceremony, and that is indeed not anything very serious in the long run, so it does not matter if we do not fully understand everything....”

“When you are thinking, do you often rub your fingers like this without knowing?”

Mei Changsu’s heart seemed to stop, but his face showed no sign of disturbance as he smiled. “Yes, this happens often, and even when I am not thinking about anything in particular, my fingers often move. I think many people have this habit, no?”

“Yes....” A nostalgic look passed over Prince Jing’s gaze. “I know a few people who do this as well....”

Mei Changsu drew both of his hands into his sleeve, then changed the subject. “I have neglected my courtesy, how has Your Highness been recently?”

Prince Jing looked at him closely for a moment. “I have been busy with the things you left for me to do, of course. My household and army have been undergoing reorganization and training, and as for external matters, I have been making friends with the people on your list.... You certainly have a keen eye, everyone you have chosen is a steadfast official with a heart for serving his country, and I have enjoyed my interactions with them. That’s right, a few days ago, I was at the Zhenshan temple, and happened to save the granddaughter of Liu Cheng, the Head Secretariat, was this also planned by you?”

Mei Changsu stared at him for a long moment, then suddenly smiled. “Does Your Highness really take me for the devil?”

“Ah....” Prince Jing had guessed wrong, and now looked a bit uncomfortable. “I have been too suspicious....”

“But Your Highness has reminded me, it would be good to plan

carefully and identify a few important people to target, and improve your relationship with them.”

Prince Jing smiled grimly, as if he did not quite agree. “If there is no truth in a relationship, what good is it? It would not do to use too much cunning when associating with honest officials like these. As long as I treat them with respect and sincerity, how can I complain if they do not develop a good impression of me? Take more time to rest, and do not waste your efforts worrying about this.”

“It is said that this is the weakness of a gentleman – that he has only sincerity, and no cunning.” Mei Changsu looked at the glimpse of ice in Prince Jing’s gaze, and answered him in a tone even colder than his had been. “In matters like the fight for the throne, if it were only a question of sincerity and goodwill, then why are the scrolls of history soaked crimson with blood? Your Highness has only begun to show your abilities, and may yet remain hidden for a while longer, but as soon as the Crown Prince or Prince Yu notices you, all tender feelings will be a thing of the past.”

Prince Jing sat in thought, his face hard, and after a long while, he said slowly, “I understand your meaning. Since I have already stepped onto this path, I am of course not this naive. I spoke as I did just now only because there are many types of people in this world, and for some, the more effort you put into it, the less likely you will be able to befriend them.”

An almost imperceptible smile hovered around Mei Changsu’s lips as he said quietly, “There has never been a universal rule when it comes to dealing with people. I have my ways, and Your Highness has your strategies. I measure talent, Your Highness judges virtue; sometimes talent takes precedence, sometimes virtue is of greater importance. It all depends on where Your Highness chooses to use someone, and when.”

Prince Jing’s brow furrowed as he lowered his head and

pondered these words. He had always been gifted at perception and comprehension, and soon, he understood the meaning behind Mei Changsu's words. He lifted his gaze and admitted defeat, saying, "Mister's knowledge and experience are truly superior to Jingyan's, please continue to teach and advise me in the days to come."

Mei Changsu smiled, and was about to speak a few soothing words when suddenly, he saw Tong Lu through a crack in the window, pacing back and forth in the courtyard, which meant that he had something to report, but knew that there was a guest in the house and so didn't dare to enter.

Chapter 63: Gunpowder

“Would Your Highness mind if one of my subordinates came in to make a report?” Mei Changsu asked with a small smile. He had not intended to see Tong Lu for now, but then abruptly changed his mind.

Prince Jing was a tactful person and he immediately stood and said, “Mister Su must be busy, I will take my leave.”

“Your Highness, please stay a little while longer, I think it would be good for you to hear the things he has to say.” Mei Changsu did not wait for Prince Jing’s response, but rose and called loudly, “Tong Lu, come in.”

Tong Lu, suddenly hearing his voice, jumped in surprise, but immediately steadied himself, then strode quickly up the stairs and pushed open the door. He was just about to clasp his hands in a salute when Mei Changsu looked at him meaningfully and said, “Greet His Highness Prince Jing.”

“Tong Lu greets His Highness!” The young man was exceedingly clever, and so as soon as he heard the identity of his guest, he immediately pushed aside his robes and knelt, bending over to touch his head to the floor in a bow.

“Please rise.” Prince Jing waved a hand, then said to Mei Changsu, “Is this a member of your honourable Alliance? He certainly has a heroic air.”

“Your Highness is too kind,” Mei Changsu replied politely, then turned to Tong Lu and asked, “Have you come to see me to report on the matter of the gunpowder?”

“Yes, sir,” Tong Lu stood up.

“His Highness does not know much about this, tell it once again from the beginning.”

“Yes, sir.” Although he was face to face with a prince, Tong Lu

still spoke naturally and confidently, without cowering or flinching. "It all started when our brothers in the Green Helms of the Canal and the Walkers Sect discovered that someone was smuggling a few hundred jin of gunpowder into the capital, a little bit at a time, mixed in with various different types of deliveries...."

After his first sentence, Prince Jing was already looking a little perplexed, and Mei Changsu smiled, and explained considerately, "Your Highness is seldom involved in jianghu matters and so likely does not know, the Green Helms of the Canals and the Walkers Sect are jianghu sects formed from our labouring brothers who work on ships or in goods delivery; one operates on water, the other on land, and they have a very good relationship with one another. Although their position is low and humble, they are extremely loyal, and their leader is an honest and straightforward man."

Prince Jing nodded, eyeing Mei Changsu as he did. Although he had long since known that this scholar was the chief of the world's greatest alliance, because he carried such a scholarly air, and looked so delicate and frail, people often forget his jianghu identity, and now that the topic had been raised, an understanding arose in his heart as he began to realize the extent of the influence this man held.

"Because it was such a great quantity of gunpowder, it would have great destructive power if it was used, and so, to ensure the chief's safety, we traced the delivery of the gunpowder." Tong Lu glanced at Mei Changsu, and continued at his signal. "But in the end, we gained no information from our searching. Later, by the chief's orders, we specially investigated the official vessels that have been recently involved in goods delivery, and found that there were indeed traces of gunpowder delivered on them recently as well. The goods this batch of official vessels were delivering included fresh fruits, perfume, Southern silk, and other similar products used by noble families in the new year, and many

residences have places orders for them, so it is almost impossible to trace their deliveries, and thus we have not yet been able to identify a single household as the primary suspect.

“But if they were able to make use of the official vessels, then they cannot be of simple jianghu background, and must have some relation to a noble house.” Prince Jing said, frowning. “Are you sure it is not related to the two official transport channels?”

Everyone present understood what Prince Jing meant by the two official transport channels. According to Da Liang law, the court upheld very strict regulations regarding gunpowder, and aside from the Jiangnan Thunderbolt Office of the Ministry of War, which was in charge of official firearms, and the fireworks factory under the Ministry of Revenue, which produced fireworks and firecrackers, no one else was allowed to come into contact with gunpowder, and so the so-called official transport channels referred to transport vessels which bore the sign of either the Thunderbolt Office or the fireworks factory, with anything else counting as a violation of the law.

“Definitely not, this batch of gunpowder does not even exist in the records of the official vessels.” Tong Lu said with certainty. “The goods delivered by the official vessels are spread throughout the city, and it is a very complicated matter to try to trace their paths, and at first, we found it difficult to know where to begin, but without coincidences, there would be no story to tell, and by chance, we happened to come across...”

“Tong Lu, perhaps you can skip to the conclusion,” Mei Changsu said gently. “His Highness is not here to listen to your stories.”

“Yes, sir,” Tong Lu scratched his head, his cheeks red. “We discovered that this batch of gunpowder was finally delivered to a large courtyard enclosed by a tall fence in the northern part of the city, where there was an illegal fireworks factory....”

“Illegal fireworks?”

“Perhaps Your Highness does not know, near the end of the year, the price of fireworks skyrockets, and so there is great profit to be made in selling fireworks. But all the income of the official fireworks factory is recorded and stored, and cannot stay in the Ministry of Revenue, so the previous Minister of Revenue, Lou Zhijing, secretly opened this illegal fireworks factory and smuggled gunpowder into it, and as for the profit from this factory... he took a little for himself, and most of it went to the Crown Prince....”

“You mean the Crown Prince and the Ministry of Revenue conspired to open this illegal fireworks factory for their own profit?” Prince Jing stood up in his fury. “What kind of a thing is this!”

“Why is Your Highness so angry?” Mei Changsu spoke impassively. “Lou Zhijing has already been toppled from his position, and once Shen Zhui assumes his post, he will certainly investigate everything carefully, and so this illegal fireworks factory will not be around for much longer.”

Prince Jing was silent for a moment, then said, “I know there is no point in getting angry, and I have never harboured much expectation towards the Crown Prince, it was only that I could not control my fury for a moment. Has Mister Su asked me to stay to hear this so that I could understand better what kind of a person the Crown Prince is?”

“It is not like that,” Mei Changsu was taken aback for a moment, and then laughed in spite of himself. “Before Tong Lu came in, I did not know that they had managed to uncover this. I only wanted Your Highness to know that there was a batch of gunpowder loose in the capital, so that you would know to be careful when you go out into the city, and also I wanted to give you the little sable....”

“The little sable?”

“Yes, a sable, which will wriggle and squirm in warning if it

smells gunpowder. I originally thought to have it accompany Your Highness around while we did not know where the gunpowder is being held.....I had not thought they would uncover the truth so quickly, they have truly exceeded my expectations.” As Mei Changsu spoke, he drew a chubby little sable from the folds of his robe and passed it to Tong Lu. “Return it to its previous owner, I have no need of it anymore, and no time to look after it.”

Prince Jing’s expression changes as he asked, “The little sable does not belong to you?”

“No, it belongs to a lady of our Alliance.”

Prince Jing’s lips quirked, but he did not say anything. Mei Changsu gestured for Tong Lu to retreat, then turned to look at Prince Jing, asking in a low voice, “Does Your Highness think I have acted a bit too coldly?”

Prince Jing’s gaze turned to him, and he answered, “That lady brought you the sable because she was worried you would be injured by the gunpowder, yet you so casually decided to give the little sable to me, aren’t you letting down the care she has shown for you? But I understand your consideration for my sake, and anyway this is not something on which I should be passing judgement. It is only that you asked, and so I spoke my thoughts plainly.”

Mei Changsu bowed his head silently, and did not reply. In truth, it was not that he did not understand these principles of getting along with other people, it was only that he had a goal in his heart he must achieve even with his dying breath, and so everything else had grown dim by comparison. Since he had chosen Prince Jing as his lord, naturally he must put him first in everything he did, and so he did not have any energy left over to consider Gong Yu’s feelings.

“Your Highness,” Mei Changsu turned his face away slightly, changing the subject. “Have you said something to my lady

Concubine Jing?”

Prince Jing stared for a moment, and then nodded. “I must tell Mother about the path I have chosen, so she may make certain preparations. But do not worry, she will definitely not try to dissuade me.”

“I know,” Mei Changsu murmured to himself in a voice too low to be heard. Then he raised his head and said, “Your Highness, please tell my lady, her power in the palace is too fragile, she must not to attempt to help Your Highness in any way under any circumstances. There are some things she can only see and remember, she must not ask any questions or attempt to investigate any further. I should still have some power in the palace, and in a little while, I will find a way to transfer them over to Concubine Jing’s side to protect her, do not worry.”

“You have people in the palace?” Prince Jing did not even attempt to hide his shock. “I have truly underestimated the strength of Mister Su’s power.”

“Your Highness does not need to be so surprised,” Mei Changsu turned his gaze back to him calmly. “The unfortunate can be found anywhere one thinks to look, and it is a simple matter to buy their loyalty with a few favours. For example, Tong Lu, whom you just saw, was taken in by Jiangzuo Alliance at a time when he was desperate and out of options, and ever since then, he has served me with fierce and fearless loyalty.”

“Is that why you trust him so much that you let him meet with me directly?”

“I trust him, but of course I am not only trusting in his character.” A sliver of coldness arose in Mei Changsu’s gaze. “Tong Lu’s mother and sister currently live in Lang province, under the care of Jiangzuo Alliance.”

Prince Jig studied him for a moment, then suddenly understood, and couldn’t help feeling his eyebrows twitch.

“I am open with Tong Lu, and am never doubtful or suspicious towards him – this is my sincerity. Keeping his mother and sister in my grasp, as a precaution – this is my cunning,” Mei Changsu said coldly. “I do not have to go to such lengths with everyone, but for those closest to me who will come into contact with crucial information, I cannot omit either sincerity or cunning. This is the point I was making in my discussion with Your Highness just now.”

Prince Jing shook his head and sighed. “Must you speak of everything you do in such a ruthless light?”

“I have always been this kind of person,” Mei Changsu said expressionlessly. “A person can only be betrayed by his friends, his enemies will never have the opportunity to ‘betray’ or ‘forsake’ him. Even for friendships woven into one’s very flesh and bones, even for friends as close as blood-brothers, there is no way to truly know the heart beneath the shell of his skin.”

Prince Jing’s gaze faltered, as events of the past flashed through his mind, and an ache rose up in his heart as he said through gritted teeth, “I admit, what you have said is true, but others will do to you as you do to them, do you not understand this logic?”

“I understand, but I do not care.” Mei Changsu gazed into the crimson flames trembling in the brazier, as the light it cast danced across his face. “Your Highness may use any method you like to test me, to try me, I do not mind, because I know where my loyalty lies, and I have never once thought of betraying it.”

His tone was light, but the meaning behind his words were fierce. Prince Jing felt a complicated mix of emotions rising in his heart, and he did not know how to reply. Silence fell over the room as the two sat, face to face, now seeming as if to be deep in thought, now seeming to be just sitting idly, with not much on their minds.

They sat there for the time it took to brew a pot of tea, and then Prince Jing stood and said slowly, “Please take care, I will take my

leave.”

Mei Changsu nodded and sat up slightly, one hand bracing himself on the side of the bed, as he said, “Take care, Your Highness, my apologies for not seeing you out.”

Prince Jing had just disappeared when Fei Liu appeared by the side of the bed, a tangerine still clutched in his hand, as he cocked his head and inspected Mei Changsu’s face for a long moment before he peeled the tangerine and held a slice up to Mei Changsu’s mouth.

“It is too cold, Su gege will not eat it now, Fei Liu can have it himself.” Mei Changsu gave him a small smile. “Go and open a couple of windows and air out the room.”

Fei Liu ran to the windows and cleverly opened the ones on the west side of the house, through which the sun was shining, and gradually, the air began to stir in the room.

“Chief, it will be too cold.” Li Gang, who had been standing guard in the courtyard, ran in, looking worried.

“It’s alright, it’s only for a little while.” Mei Changsu listened for a moment. “Who’s shouting in the courtyard?”

“Uncle Ji and Aunt Ji,” Li Gang couldn’t help laughing. “Aunt Ji has hidden Uncle Ji’s wine gourds again, and Uncle Ji went looking for them secretly and got himself scolded by Aunt Ji, who asked him how he could expect to find them so easily when she has been hiding his things for so many years now....”

Mei Changsu’s hand slipped, and the cup of tea Fei Liu had handed him fell to the ground, shattering into powder.

“Chief, what’s wrong?” Li Gang was pale with fear. “Fei Liu, hold onto him, I’ll go find Physician Yan....”

“No need,” Mei Changsu raised a hand to stop him, and then lay back down onto the soft pillows, rubbing his head in deep thought, as a thin sheen of sweat broke out over his forehead.

By the same logic, this was not the first year the illegal fireworks factory had started smuggling gunpowder, and so why had they remained undiscovered in previous years, but were so easily found out by the Green Helms and the Walkers this year? Was it because Lou Zhijing had been toppled from his position, and some of the controls over the operation had become complacent?

No, it couldn't be.... The illegal fireworks factory had been operating for so many years, they must have established their own means of delivery, and would not need to resort to the mass transport channels like those of the Green Helms and the Walkers. Even smuggling through the official vessels would make more sense....the Ministry of Revenue transported huge amounts of goods every year by the official vessels anyway, and they were completely under its control, and so no matter how you looked at it, it made no sense for them to take the risk of using civil transport over water or land, therefore....

...whoever was behind the smuggling of gunpowder via the Green Helms and the Walkers Sect was not affiliated with the illegal fireworks factory of the Ministry of Revenue!

Let's say.....that person knew all along the secret of the Ministry of Revenue's illegal fireworks factory, then naturally, he would use it to his advantage. Ideally, his smuggling of gunpowder into the capital would not be discovered, but if it was, he could easily divert the trail to the illegal fireworks factory, and so obscure the truth, because the illegal fireworks factory really was smuggling gunpowder into the capital, and so most people would stop their investigations here, believing that they had uncovered the truth, and would not realize that there was another batch of gunpowder, with a different purpose and destination, that had quietly entered the city....

Who was this person? What was his goal? If the gunpowder wasn't being used to produce fireworks, then it was intended to cause an explosion somewhere. He had put so much effort into this

operation, and had even managed to use the Ministry of Revenue as both his shield and his smokescreen, and so that meant he could not be just a simple jianghu man..... and if this wasn't related to jianghu grudges, then it could only be related to the court, so was he trying to kill someone, or was he trying to destroy something? What kind of important occasion was there in the capital recently that could have become this person's target?

At this point, four words flashed across Mei Changsu's mind like a bolt of lightning.

The year end's sacrificial rites.....the most important yearly ceremony of Da Liang.....

Mei Changsu's face was pale as snow, but his eyes shone, as if burning with some hidden fire.

He thought of something he had heard. At the time, he had only felt a faint sense of unease, but had not paid it much attention. Now, it rose up suddenly in his mind like the key to a locked door.

Amidst the dense fog of confusion, Mei Changsu leapt past every facade and caught hold of the faint light shining from deep within its midst.

Chapter 64: Pushing Aside the Fog

When Physician Yan arrived hurriedly, Mei Changsu had already taken one of the pills specially made for him by Doctor Xun Zhen and was standing fully dressed in the middle of the room, waiting for Fei Lou to add coal to his little portable brazier. When he saw the old physician widen his eyes and puff out his beard in surprise, the great chief smiled apologetically and said, “Physician Yan, I must go out personally today, but don’t worry, I have put on many layers, and Fei Liu and Li Gang will be with me, and the wind and snow have already stopped, so there should not be much danger....”

“Whether there is danger or not is for me to decide!” Physician Yan stood guard in front of the door, blocking it with his body.

“I know what you are thinking, but don’t think that Zhen fellow’s heart protection pills are some kind of magic drug, they will get you through a crisis but they won’t save your life. You may have only caught a chill, but your body is not the same as other people’s, and now you still refuse to take care of it, and say you want to run around outside in the cold? What happens if they bring you back lying on a stretcher? Are you trying to mar my good name?”

“Physician Yan, let me go out today, I promise I will return in good shape, and from now on, I will listen to everything you say....” Mei Changsu spoke gently, smiling as he made a gesture to Fei Liu. “Fei Liu, open the door.”

“Hey....” White clouds of steam were blowing from the mouth of the frustrated Physician Yan, but in the end, he was not a martial arts master, and so Fei Liu swiftly lifted him over his shoulder and moved him to one side, as Mei Changsu took advantage of the distraction to sneak out the door, hurrying onto the palanquin Li Gang had already prepared, and, with a quiet word to the palanquin bearers, he was lifted and borne away from the

exasperated cries of the old physician behind him.

Perhaps it was the effect of the drug, or the warmth and comfort of the palanquin, but Mei Changsu felt quite well, his mind was clear, and his hands and feet were not as weak as they had been yesterday, and as for the situation he was about to face, he had already made adequate preparations.

The palanquin bearers were walking quickly, but they could still only walk, and so it would take some time for them to arrive at their destination. Mei Changsu closed his eyes, on the one hand conserving his energy, and on the other, going through his thoughts once again.

If it were only a matter of stopping him, there would be nothing challenging about what he was about to do. The difficulty lay in controlling the deeper currents without destroying the peaceful facade on the surface.

About two hours later, the palanquin stopped at the door of a graceful and elegant manor. Li Gang knocked on the gates, and not long after his name card had been handed into the residence, its owner came hurrying out.

“Brother Su, why have you come so suddenly? Quick, come in.”

Mei Changsu emerged from the palanquin, supported by Fei Liu, and looked at the young man standing before him. “You’re dressed very smartly.”

“We were playing polo and it got hot, so we took off some of our outer layers, and now we’re stinking of sweat, Brother Su, you mustn’t laugh at me.” Yan Yujin smiled as he accompanied Mei Changsu into the manor. They walked through two doors, and a vast field lay before them, on which several young people were practising their batting skills. “Brother Su, why have you suddenly come here?” Xiao Jingrui ran over, astonishment written all over his face, his question identical to Yan Yujin’s just a moment ago.

“There hasn’t been much going on lately, and I wanted to come out for a stroll.” Mei Changsu looked at the two inseparable friends standing before him, and gave a small smile. “I have been in the city for so long, and still have not come to pay my visits to Yujin’s residence, my manners have been lacking. Yujin, is your esteemed father here?”

“He has not come back yet.” Yan Yujin shrugged, his voice light. “My father’s attention has been completely absorbed by those Daoist priests, and he always leaves early and returns late, but I think he will be back soon.”

“You go and have fun then, there’s no need to take care of me. I’ll just watch from the side, and learn a thing or two.”

“Why joke around, Brother Su? Why don’t you come play with us?” Yan Yujin suggested, excited.

“You’re the one joking, not me. Look at me, if I came with you, would I be hitting the ball or would the ball be hitting me?” Mei Changsu laughed and shook his head.

“Then let Fei Liu come and play, he would certainly enjoy it.” Yan Yujin’s eyes shone. “Come on, what colour horse does Xiao Fei Liu like, tell Yan gege.”

“Red!”

Yan Yujin darted away, busying himself finding a horse and harness for Fei Liu. But Xiao Jingrui stayed by Mei Changsu’s side, asking concernedly, “Brother Su, are you feeling any better? There are some seats over there, let’s go over and sit.”

Mei Changsu nodded and asked, smiling, “Where’s Xie Bi? Didn’t he come over with you?”

“Second Brother has never liked playing polo, and anyway, there are things in the manor he must take care of now that the new year is approaching, and these few days are always the busiest in the whole year.” Mei Changsu saw that Xiao Jingrui was putting on his

fur coat as he spoke, and said hurriedly, "You don't need to keep me company, go and play with them."

"I've just about finished anyway." There was a warm smile on Xiao Jingrui's face. "I think it will be interesting to watch Fei Liu play."

"Don't look down on our Fei Liu." Mei Changsu sat and waved at his little body guard on the grounds. "He is a very good rider, and once he remembers the rules, you may find him a difficult opponent."

As the two spoke, Fei Liu had already leaped onto one of the red horses, and Yan Yujin stood by his side, showing him how to swing the bat. The youth tried it a few times, but he had not yet mastered the skill, and so as he swung, he sent grass and soil flying, but could not manage to hit the ball. Everyone else had stopped playing, and were crowding around to watch curiously, and Fei Liu, enraged by the attention, suddenly sent the ball flying high into the air, over the tall walls surrounding the manor, and a moment later, there was a loud cry from outside, "Who, who hit us with this ball?"

"It looks like we hit someone, let me go look." Xiao Jingrui stood and went out the door with Yan Yujin, and no one knew how they handled the situation, but it was a long while before they returned. Meanwhile, Fei Liu continued to play on the field, running after the ball, and it was not long before he had broken his bat into two pieces.

Soon, the other players saw that it was growing late, and one by one took their leave, leaving Fei Liu alone on the grounds, riding back and forth. Yan Yujin went to give him a new bat, but he didn't want it, and continued chasing the ball happily around the field.

"This is the first time I've seen polo played like this," Yan Yujin was laughing as he came over and punched Xiao Jingrui playfully

in the arm. "But Fei Liu's riding skills are really no worse than yours, and someday, I will train him well, and then you won't be able to walk around with your nose in the air thinking you're the best at polo."

"When have I ever done that?" Xiao Jingrui was embarrassed, but couldn't help laughing. "You're just jealous."

Mei Changsu broke in to ask, "Who did he hit outside the wall? Was it serious?"

"It didn't hit anyone directly, it was a diplomat group sent over from Yeqin to bring the new year's greetings, and the ball hit one of their wooden boxes. From what I could see, Yeqin sent over quite a lot of people this year, but the head diplomat looks like a bit of a coward, and doesn't have the bearing of an emissary at all. Although Yeqin is only one of the vassal states of our Da Liang, they are still the masters of their region, why didn't they send someone a little more presentable?"

A distant memory stirred in Mei Changsu's mind at his words, and there was a faraway look in his gaze as he said, "Then, according to the young master Yan, what kind of a person would be worthy of representing a country as its envoy?"

"In my opinion, the kind of person with that kind of presence would be someone like Lin Xiang," Yan Yujin said passionately. "He was sent as an envoy to the most fearsome countries, but he never showed any fear himself. His speeches could sway an entire court, his courage could intimidate any tyrant, and he always returned unharmed, and never brought dishonour to his lord or his country. He was the very embodiment of wisdom and courage."

"You do not need to envy the ancients," there was a hint of a smile at the corner of Mei Changsu's lips. "An ambassador like this has once appeared in our Da Liang as well."

The two young men leaned forward curiously. "Really, who? What was he like?"

“That year, Da Yu, Northern Yan, and Northern Zhou formed an alliance, intending to conquer Da Liang and divide it between them. There was a great disparity between their military power and ours, we were outnumbered five to one, and soon, their army had breached our borders and invaded into our land. This envoy was twenty years old at the time, and with the imperial rod in his hand and only a hundred men by his side, he crossed into the enemy camps, dressed in his raw silk robes and cap, his hatchet hanging at his waist. The Emperor of Da Yu marveled at his courage and commanded for him to be brought into the royal presence. Before the court, he debated the lords of Da Yu into silence, his tongue sharp as a knife. These kinds of alliances are always precarious to begin with, and at his stirring, it fell apart completely and tore itself to shreds. Our generals seized the chance to launch a counterattack, and so delivered the country from danger. So, an envoy like this is no less impressive than Lin Xiang, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Wow, is there really a person like this in our Da Liang? Why have I never heard of him?” Yan Yujin’s face was full of admiration.

“These events took place more than thirty years ago, and they are seldom mentioned anymore nowadays. You are both young, it is not surprising that you have not heard of this.”

“Then how did you come to know about it?”

“I am quite a few years older than you, I heard them mentioned by my elders.”

“Then is this envoy still alive? If he is, I would love to meet him, and witness such elegance and grace in person.”

Mei Changsu gazed deeply into Yan Yujin’s eyes, his expression somber, as he said slowly but clearly, “Of course he is.....Yujin, he is your father.”

The smile on Yan Yujin’s face froze for a moment, and his lips

began to tremble slightly. “What.....what did you say?”

“Marquis Yan, Marquis Yan,” Mei Changsu said coldly. “Did you think this Marquis’ rank was given to him because he was the son of Imperial Tutor Yan, or because of his identity as the Imperial Uncle?”

“But, but....” Yan Yujin was so shocked that he couldn’t sit still, and had to steady himself by holding tightly to the arms of his chair. “My dad now.....now he is....”

Mei Changsu sighed quietly and lowered his eyes, shaking his head as he recited quietly, “The grass grows wildly on the shores of the ancient capital, I gaze towards the long river, which still winds around the lonely city. I think of the black-robed youth, noble and handsome, his soldiers behind him, his spear splitting the clouds ahead. He looked out over the arrogant army rushing up from the South, like a wave cresting over them, and then he looked to the East, and turned his attention to the task before him.” His voice trailed off, his gaze full of sorrow.

For those who had dwelt in the eternal spring of youth, the blood of heroes running hot in their veins – who among them had not once laughed at the storms to come, and scoffed at the passing of time?

But nothing lasts forever, time flows on like water, and, like a flash of light streaking before the eyes, the youth of yesteryear has passed away and cannot be recovered.

Still, no matter the depth of Mei Changsu’s sorrow, it could not compare to the shock Yan Yujin was feeling. This was because, in recent years, he had been the one closest to the lethargic old man who now only spent his days with his sticks of perfumed incense. That apathetic face, that whitened head, those lowered eyes that never seemed to care about anything that went on in the world..... he had never imagined that they had once experienced such a glorious youth.

Xiao Jingrui put his hand on Yan Yujin's back and patted him gently, opening his mouth to lighten the atmosphere, but found that he did not know where to begin.

Mei Changsu did not look at the two young men again, but stood, his gaze turned towards the main gate, and said lowly, "He has returned."

Just as he had said, a green and vermillion palanquin was carried through the doors, and after the bearers laid down the palanquin and drew open its thick curtain, a tall but slightly stooped older gentleman, dressed in a gold-lined robe, stepped down with the support of a male servant, but although his head was white with age and his face lined with wrinkles, he did not look very old, his appearance still consistent with his age in the early fifties.

Mei Changsu looked at him for a moment, and then quickly walked over, and it was Yan Yujin instead who stood there in a daze, unmoving.

"Marquis Yan is returning to his residence so late, you must be working very hard." Mei Changsu came forward, greeting him directly.

Yan Que was the Imperial Uncle before he was made Marquis, and so although the rank of Marquis was higher, everyone had grown accustomed to calling him the Imperial Uncle, and so most continued to do so, only addressing him as Marquis when speaking to him face to face, as he himself clearly preferred the latter.

"I beg your pardon, you are...."

"I am Su Zhe."

"Oh...." This name was currently very popular in the city, and even if Yan Que truly did not pay much attention to the affairs of the world around him, he would still have known it, and so he smiled politely. "It is an honour to meet you at last. I have often heard my son praising you as a giant among men, and truly, your

graceful manner is remarkable to behold.”

Mei Changsu smiled, and did not waste time in courtesies, but came immediately to the point. “Pray Marquis Yan set aside some time, I have something of vital importance to discuss with you alone.”

“To discuss with me?” Marquis Yan couldn’t help laughing. “Your fame has been spreading through the city, and I am in the dusk of my years, and no longer pay any attention to the affairs of the world, how could you have anything important to discuss with me?”

“Pray Marquis Yan stop wasting time,” Mei Changsu’s expression was like ice, his voice cold as snow. “If there is no place quiet indoors, then we will have to talk here. But it is really too cold outside, may I borrow a little gunpowder from you to warm my hands?”

Chapter 65: Yan Que

Mei Chang's voice was very low as he spoke into Yan Que's ear, his gaze locked onto his face, taking note of his every expression.

But surprisingly, Yan Que's face was still, as if those abrupt words had not disturbed him in the slightest, and his calm was so absolute that Mei Changsu almost believed that he had come to the wrong conclusion entirely.

But this feeling passed quickly, and he soon knew he had been correct, because Yan Que had lifted his head to look him in the eye.

Those permanently lowered eyes which concealed all thoughts were not as calm as the rest of his expression, and in those clear pupils, an unusually complicated mix of emotions was stirring. There was shock, despair, resentment, grief; the only thing not present was fear.

But Yan Que should have been afraid. No matter how you looked at it, what he had planned counted as treason worthy of a death sentence up to the ninth generation, and evidently, this great crime of his now lay within the grasp of the refined scholar standing before him.

And yet, he was not afraid as he continued to stare at Mei Changsu, but though his face was expressionless, his eyes were filled with fatigue, sorrow, and a deep, unquenchable resentment.

In that expression, it was as if he was climbing a mountain, having braved countless dangers and unfathomable suffering, and just as he was finally nearing its peak, he suddenly came across a wide chasm impossible to breach, which said to him coldly, "Turn back, you cannot cross over."

Mei Changsu stood before him now, informing him of his failure. In this moment, he could not spare any attention to the consequences of this failure, because there was only one thought in

his mind.

I could not kill him. And if I could not kill that man this time, then I will not have another chance in the future.

By this time, Yan Yujin and Xiao Jingrui had run over, and were looking curiously at the two of them.

“Yujin, is there some place quiet, I have some things to discuss with your esteemed father, and I do not wish to be disturbed by anyone.” Mei Changsu asked quietly.

“Yes...the Painting Building at the back....” Yan Yujin was extremely intelligent, and simply from their expressions, he knew something was wrong. “Brother Su, please follow me....”

Mei Changsu nodded, and turned to Yan Que. “Marquis, after you.”

Yan Que smiled ruefully, then lifted his head and took a deep breath, saying, “Please, after you.”

The row of people walked silently, and even Xiao Jingrui tactfully kept quiet. When they arrived at the Painting Building, Mei Changsu entered with Yan Que, indicating with a glance for the two young men to wait outside. The innermost room of the Painting Building was a small, plain Painting Room, adorned with simple furniture, and aside from a wall filled with bookshelves, there was only a table, two chairs, and a long couch by the window.

“Marquis,” Mei Changsu came straight to the point once the two were seated on the chairs. “Have you hidden the gunpowder in the sacrificial altar?”

The muscles in Yan Que’s face jumped, but he did not answer.

“Of course, you may deny it, but it is not difficult to prove, I have only to let Meng Zhi know, and he will conduct a thorough search of the entire sacrificial altar.” Mei Changsu pressed on relentlessly. “I think the reason you have spent so much time meditating at the

Daoist temples is to divert attention away from your interactions with the master in charge of the rites, is that right? And these masters are naturally your accomplices as well, or perhaps I should say, you have helped all your accomplices to become masters, am I correct?"

Yan Que looked at him and said coldly, "It is said that the wise die young, Mister Su possesses such intelligence, are you not afraid of shortening your lifespan?"

"The span of one's life is determined by the heavens, why should I worry?" Mei Changsu returned his gaze carelessly. "As for the Marquis.....did you really believe you could succeed?"

"At least before you appeared, everything was going very smoothly. My masters have already hidden the gunpowder without anyone noticing, under the guise of rehearsing for the ceremony, and the fuse has been placed in the furnace. As soon as the Emperor lights the incense to worship the heavens, he will ignite the fuse hidden in the furnace, and the entire altar will explode."

"It is indeed as I thought," Mei Changsu sighed. "When the Emperor lights the incense, although the princes and ministers will be kneeling at the base of the altar, nine feet away, and will thus escape the explosion, the Empress must stand on the altar as well.....and even though the two of you have been estranged for so many years, you still retain some brotherly love for her, and so you found a way to prevent her from attending the ceremony, right?"

"That's right," Yan Que answered plainly. "Although she has committed many sins, in the end, she is still my younger sister, and I cannot condemn her to such a cruel fate..... Did Mister Su begin to suspect me because you thought her illness too strange?"

"Not entirely. Besides the Empress' illness, Yujin also said something which aroused my suspicion."

"Yujin?"

“One night, he sent me a few baskets of Lingnan tangerines, and said that they had been delivered via official vessels and so were very popular, and it was only because you had pre-ordered some that the Yan residence managed to acquire any at all.” Mei Changsu glanced over, his gaze sharp as the edge of a knife. “You claim to be devoted to the temples and the gods and to have given up worldly affairs, and do not even spend New Year’s Eve with your family, so why would you purposefully order fresh fruits to celebrate the new year? You were only using this as an excuse to confirm the arrival date of the official vessels, so you could arrange for your gunpowder to enter the city at the same time as the Ministry of Revenue’s smuggled gunpowder, so that if anyone noticed anything strange, you could neatly divert the trail to the illegal fireworks factory, because as long as the timing was right, it would be very difficult for anyone to see through the deception.”

“Unfortunately, you still saw through it,” Yan Que said ironically. “Mister Su is truly a great talent, it is small wonder that everyone is trying to acquire you for his own.”

Mei Changsu paid no attention to his mocking, but continued quietly, “The Marquis has taken such a great risk to assassinate the Emperor, for what purpose?”

Yan Que stared at him for a moment, and then suddenly laughed out loud. “I have no other motive, I only want him to die. Assassinating the Emperor is my only goal. This is because he should die, I care nothing for treason or heavenly mandate, as long as he is killed, there is nothing I will not do.”

Mei Changsu gazed into the distance, his voice low. “Is it because of Consort Chen?”

Yan Que’s entire body trembled as he stopped laughing suddenly and turned his head towards him. “You.....you know about Consort Chen?”

“It was not so long ago, is it so surprising that I know? In that

year, the eldest son of the Emperor, Prince Qi, was sentenced to death, and his birth mother Consort Chen committed suicide in the palace. Although no one mentions them now, it was still only twelve years ago....”

“Twelve years...” Yan Que’s smile was full of sorrow, his eyes burning with unshed tears, “It is long enough. Besides me, who is there left to remember her now....”

Mei Changsu was quiet for a moment before he said, “Since you harboured such deep feelings for her, why did you stand by and watch as she entered the palace back then?”

“Why?” Yan Que gritted his teeth. “Because that person was the Emperor. The Emperor we had all once protected with our lives, whom we had helped onto the throne. We had been friends since we first began studying together as children, as we learned martial arts together, and later as we saved Da Liang from danger together, but once he became Emperor, there was only lord and servant. The three of us.....we had sworn so many times to walk together in sorrow and in joy, to support each other all our lives, to remain loyal unto death, but in the end, he did not keep a single one of his pledges. The second year after he ascended the throne, he stole Yueyao from me, and although he knew we were in love, he did not even hesitate. Lin dage counselled me to be patient and endure, and so I could only endure, and when Jingyu was born, and Yueyao was raised to the title of Consort Chen, I even thought I could let go of her entirely, so long as he treated her well.....and in the end? Jingyu dead, Yueyao dead, even Lin dage..... he ruthlessly struck them down, one by one. If I had not fled in despair from all worldly affairs, he would not have so much as blinked before taking my life as well.....such a cold, despicable Emperor, do you not think he deserves to die?”

“And so you plotted for so many years, simply in order to kill him.” Mei Changsu looked into Yan Que’s aged gaze. “And after you have killed him, then what? When the Emperor has been

blasted into smoke and dust on the altar, leaving chaos in his wake, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu fighting viciously, raising confusion in the court and instability on our borders, in the end, who will suffer, and who will reap the reward? The tainted names of the ones you love will still rest on their shoulders, without any hope of redemption. Prince Qi will still be guilty of treason, the Lin family still guilty of rebellion, and Consort Chen's soul will still wander alone, without a plaque to her name or a place to rest on this earth! You will have overturned heaven and earth and doomed our nation, all for the sake of killing one person!"

Mei Changsu had come today in spite of his own illness, firstly because of the urgency of the situation, and secondly in order to save the Marquis. Now, his voice was raised with fury, his cheeks flushed and his heart stirring with passion. "Marquis Yan, do you think this is revenge? No, this is not true revenge, you are only venting your anger and personal spite, all for the sake of soothing your hurt feelings, and heedlessly destroying countless lives in the process. Was the Xuanjing Bureau established just for show? If the Emperor is assassinated, will they not pour everything they have into the investigation? And if I can trace the source back to you before anything has even happened, you can be sure they will be able to do so afterwards! You may not care whether you live or die, but why should Yujin have to bear the consequences of your crime? Even if he was not borne of the woman you loved, he is still your own son, and to say nothing of the fact that he has not grown up with your love and affection, can you really bear to sentence him to the heavy crime of treason and the cruel death of beheading at such a young age? You accuse the Emperor of being cold and despicable, then tell me, are you truly any better than he?"

His harsh words seemed to pierce right through the skin, and the corner of Yan Que's mouth trembled as he raised a hand to cover his eyes, murmuring softly, "I know Yujin does not deserve this.....it was his misfortune in this life to be my son.....perhaps it is his fate then...."

Mei Changsu laughed coldly. “You have no hope of success now, so if you have even the slightest remorse for Yujin’s sake, why not turn back while you still can?”

“Turn back?” Yan Que smiled bitterly. “The arrow has been strung. How can I turn back?”

“The sacrificial ceremony has not yet begun, the Emperor’s incense stick has not yet fallen into the sacrificial furnace, why can you not turn back?” Mei Changsu’s gaze was deep, his expression solemn. “However you planted the gunpowder, remove it by the same method, and then deliver it to a location near the illegal fireworks factory, and I will send someone to take care of it from there.”

Yan Que lifted his head, his gaze full of astonishment. “What do you mean? Why would you involve yourself in waters as muddied as these?”

“Because I am working for Prince Yu, and if you commit this treason, it would be difficult for the Empress to escape blame as well. Taking care of the matter at its root is the best option,” Mei Changsu said indifferently. “If I had not intended to give you a way out, would I have come all this way to talk to you in secret? Wouldn’t it have been easier for me to go directly to the Xuanjing Bureau?”

“You.....” Yan Que’s gaze shimmered as he looked at the frail scholar sitting before him for a long moment, as if in deep thought, before he seemed to grow distant once more. “Of course it would be good if you were to let me go, but I must tell you honestly, even if you behave leniently towards me today, even if you hold me in your grasp, I will never work for your lord.”

Mei Changsu smiled. “I had not thought of asking you to work for Prince Yu, it is enough for you to continue visiting your temples in peace. As for the affairs of the court, I only ask that you observe them carefully in the days to come.”

Yan Que looked at him incredulously, shaking his head as he said, "In this world, there is no kindness without a cost, you are letting me go without asking for anything in return, what are your true intentions?"

Mei Changsu's gaze was unreadable as a bleak smile played around his lips. "The Marquis has not forgotten Consort Chen, for the sake of love and passion, and has not forgotten Commander Lin, for the sake of friendship and righteousness. There are too few left in this world who still hold love and friendship in their hearts, so if I can save just one, then it is still worthwhile to me..... I only ask the Marquis to remember my words today, and not act hastily again."

Yan Que looked at him deeply for a long moment, then took a deep breath and smiled broadly. "Good! Since Mister Su has already acquired such a nobility of spirit in your young age, then I will not persist in my absurd conjectures. I will find a way to remove the gunpowder beneath the sacrificial altar, but the day of the ceremony is drawing near, and the guard around the altar grows stricter by the day, and if I am so unfortunate as to be caught in the act, I ask you to remember your friendship with my son, and save his life."

Mei Changsu smiled. "Marquis Yan, you are old friends with Commander Meng, and in these festive days, he will not be looking very seriously to catch anyone, so as long as you are cautious, there should be no problem."

"Let us hope it will be as you say then." Yan Que cupped his hands and bowed, smiling, having completely regained his composure. He had just received such a great fright and held a conversation that would determine his life or death, and which had neatly put an end to years and years of careful planning, and yet he had managed to steady his emotions so completely and in such a short period of time. Mei Changsu couldn't help smiling in admiration at the extraordinary courage of the man before him.

The conversation was finished, and any further words would be superfluous. The two rose together without speaking and strode out of the Painting Building. As soon as the door opened, Yan Yujin rushed over, calling, "Dad, Brother Su, you...." He suddenly faltered, not knowing how to continue.

"I've already talked with your esteemed father, and the two of you will greet the new year together this new year's eve." Mei Changsu gave a small smile. "As for Fei Liu, I must trouble you to bring him out to play another time."

Yan Yujin looked first at the one, and then at the other, and knew in his heart that the secrets they had discussed inside the room were certainly not as simple as this, but he was wise and insightful beneath his cheery exterior, and so he only stared for a moment before he shook aside his questions, and then smiled brightly, nodding his head enthusiastically. "That's great!"

Mei Changsu smiled back, and then looked around. "Where is Jingrui?"

"His Zhuo dad and mum are arriving tonight, he has to go welcome them, so I sent him home."

"Zhuo Dingfeng has arrived...." Mei Changsu's eyebrows trembled. "Do they come every year?"

"Once every two years. Sometimes, they will come two years in a row, because Uncle Xie is busy in the court and cannot always leave the capital, and so the Zhuo family has to come here more often."

"Oh," Mei Changsu nodded slightly, feeling Yan Que gazing at him searchingly, but ignored him, and lifted his head to look up at the sky.

The sun was setting in all its splendour, and this long day was finally nearing its end. He wondered whether tomorrow would bring any unexpected new waves.

“Yujin, go and bring Mister Su’s palanquin in past the doors. The wind is rising, he should not step outside,” Yan Que calmly instructed his son, and waited for him to turn and leave before turning his gaze back to Mei Changsu, and asking in a low voice, “I have just thought of something else, it is not Prince Yu who has asked you to conceal my crime today, is it?”

“Prince Yu does not even know about this,” Mei Changsu replied honestly. “Actually, before I came to see the Marquis, even I was not entirely confident.”

Yan Que closed his eyes tightly and sighed. “Who is Prince Yu and what has he done to deserve a talent such as you? I only fear that the world of the future already belongs to him....”

Mei Changsu glanced at him. “The Marquis and the Empress are brother and sister, what is wrong with Prince Yu ruling the world?”

“What is wrong?” Yan Que’s eyes flashed, and it was as if a layer of frost had been painted over his clear features. “They are all the same, cold and unfeeling, using harsh and cutthroat methods to achieve their goals. I am no longer young, and have lost all those close to me, and though I have striven to live until now, I still have no way to redeem their names and overturn the injustices done to them. And so, since there is nothing left for me now, why should I care who rules the world?”

A dim light glowed in Mei Changsu’s gaze as he asked, “The Marquis knows that I am Prince Yu’s man, are you not afraid of the repercussions of these words?”

“Prince Yu has always known how I felt, but he also knows I do not involve myself in court affairs, and the Empress has ordered him to ignore me, so he has done nothing to me, nor I to him.” Yan Que laughed coldly, “With your talent and intellect, it would be a simple matter to destroy me, but do not think you will be able to control me or use me for Prince Yu’s sake.”

“The Marquis is mistaken, it was only an idle question, nothing more.” Mei Changsu’s face was calm, his expression peaceful. “As long as the Marquis does not act hastily again in the future, I will not mention today’s events again. As for Prince Yu, I have never held out any hope for the Marquis’ assistance in any way.”

Yan Que stood, a distant look in his eyes, not knowing whether he should believe Mei Changsu’s promise or not. But until Yan Yujin returned with Su Zhe’s palanquin, he did not say a single word, only looking silently towards the snow-covered steps in the courtyard.

Only as the palanquin rose to leave did Mei Changsu hear the long, heavy sigh let out by this heroic figure of days gone by.

The sound of his sigh drifted into the distance, as if it could carry his memories and regrets backwards in time.

Chapter 66: New Year's Feast

When he arrived back at his own manor, Mei Changsu was shaking all over, breathless and weak, but he hung on grimly as he gave instructions for Yan Que to be closely monitored before finally relaxing and lying dizzily back down onto his bed, apologizing to Physician Yan all the while.

Physician Yan completely ignored his apologies, his face still dark as he performed acupuncture on his patient, and Li Gang, watching from the side, worried that in his anger, he would stick his needles into places they should not go.

After resting like this for three days, Mei Changsu appeared to have recovered a little of his energy. Perhaps it was because his subordinates were afraid to disturb him, or perhaps it was really that nothing of much significance happened during this time, but the capital seemed quiet over these three days, the only news being an edict from the Emperor stating that the Empress had taken ill, and so would be replaced by Gracious Consort Xu in the year's end ceremonies.

According to rumour, the Emperor had wanted Consort Yue to take the Empress' place, but Consort Yue had personally written to him saying that her rank was low and her titles insufficient, and suggested that, by due of her superiority in both rank and years in the palace, Gracious Consort Xu should take over the ceremony.

This letter was written with reason and passion, as well as an ostentatiously grand manner, and the Emperor, greatly impressed, personally bestowed upon her a new pearl hairpin as a reward. When the news spread to him, Prince Yu was livid.

But despite his anger, these kinds of plays were not uncommon in the fight for the throne, and in any case, it was no great victory and there was not any substantial loss, and as the end of the year was near, both sides were too busy to continue the fight for now.

The Su manor was also preparing busily for the new year, but this was not something that required Mei Changsu's attention, as Li Gang was more than capable of handling these kinds of internal affairs, and on Mister Shisan's end, there was Gong Yu to order several carts of goods for the new year, including most of the newest and most interesting toys on the market, and soon, Fei Liu was playing frantically from dawn to dusk.

The imperial Mu residence, imperial Yu residence, Yan residence, Xie residence, and the Commander General's residence also sent over new year's gifts, and even Prince Jing sent over one of the senior members of his residence to bring over new year's greetings and several tokens of appreciation.

For most of the gifts he received, Mei Changsu only glanced over the gift list before letting Li Gang deal with them. He even let him handle the sending of gifts in return, and did not seem interested at all in the details.

But amongst all the gifts, Fei Liu's special favourites were the seven boxes of fireworks sent over by the imperial Mu residence, each stick as thick as a young child's arm, which gave off bright and colourful displays when set off, and Fei Liu spent at least an hour every night setting them off, so that before new year's eve had arrived, he had already used them all, and when Li Gang sent someone out to buy more, they discovered that the imperial Mu residence had sent over special imperial fireworks, which could not be found in the markets.

And so, to placate Fei Liu, the first letter the barely recovered qilin prodigy wrote when he finally rose from his bed was to Nihuang, asking her to buy ten more boxes of fireworks on his behalf.

The day after he sent out the letter, the carriage bearing the fireworks arrived at the back door of the Su manor. Fei Liu was delighted, and Mei Changsu too was pleased.

This was because, after he had written to Nihuang, it was really only the imperial Mu residence who sent over fireworks, and neither Prince Yu nor any other residences tried to curry favour by doing the same, which demonstrated how strictly Nihuang governed her household, as evidently, gossip and information did not spread easily without her knowledge and consent.

New Year's Eve finally arrived. That long-awaited sacrificial ceremony, which had stirred up so much conflict both open and hidden in the preceding days, proceeded smoothly and without the slightest complication, and aside from the Empress' absence and Consort Yue's demotion, did not vary greatly from the previous year's ceremony.

After the ceremony, the Emperor returned to the palace and began the process of bestowing the new year's gifts, as the princes, the imperial household, and the court ministers all knelt outside Yinan gate to receive his favour. In accordance with the usual conventions, the Crown Prince would receive the highest level of honour, followed by Prince Yu, and then followed by the other princes, with the remaining members of the imperial household and the court ministers receiving gifts befitting their respecting ranks. This year was no exception, except for the fact that, in addition to receiving the same gifts as the other princes, Prince Jing was also gifted with a silver suit of armour. But his recent performance had been very good, and this additional honour still did not bring him anywhere near the level of Prince Yu's prestige, and so this did not end up attracting much attention.

The new year's feast that night was laid out in Xianan Hall, and the Emperor went first to Cian Palace to pay his respects to the Grand Empress Dowager before returning to the hall to celebrate the new year with his concubines, consorts, princes, and imperial household. He also made arrangements to send a portion of the dishes to the manors of some of his most important ministers. To receive the gift of a dish from the Emperor's table on New Year's

Eve was a sign of supreme imperial favour, and only the noblest and wisest of the officials could hope for such an honour.

No one could have known that this 'dish-giving' ritual would lead to so much trouble.

Confetti littered the ground and fireworks lit the sky over the capital city on this new year's eve, as families gathered in celebration, and the glow of lamp-light filled every window. It was certainly lively, but the atmosphere was very different from the night of the lantern festival, as this time, everyone gathered with his family at home, and aside from a few children lighting firecrackers outside the doors of their homes, there was no one out on the street.

The guards in charge of delivering the gifted dishes were dressed in yellow and departed the palace in groups of five, riding through the deserted streets and spreading out as they headed towards their destinations – the manors that had been selected for this great honour.

Besides the guard holding the case of food in the center, the four guards around him carried bright, coloured lanterns that were specially made in the palace, and huge red lanterns also lit the sides of the main streets. But compared to the dazzling sunlight of the day, the light of these lanterns still could not illuminate every dark corner, and the tall palace walls cast looming shadows over the paths on which they rode.

The danger came from this darkness, and the whirling shadows were so quick that even its victims could not see where that fatal flash of a blade had come from, nor where it disappeared to.

The bodies fell heavily to the ground, but the horses kept riding forwards, and the blood was left to cool in the cold winter's night, the weak cries drowned out in the noise of the firecrackers, unheard and unnoticed.

The dazzling fireworks spiraled into the sky. It was nearing

midnight, the point at which the old and new years met, and even the guards of the palace night watch slowed their steps and turned their gazes to the blossoming flowers opening up all over the night sky, as the racket of firecrackers in the city neared the height of its frenzy.

Mei Changsu took hold of a long stick of incense and personally lit the largest firework, which Fei Liu had saved especially for him, and a streak of light flew across the night, burrowing deep into the darkness before erupting into glorious colour, lighting up half the sky in its splendour.

“Happy new year! Happy new year!” The cries rang out in the Su manor, and even the normally composed Li Gang produced a horn from somewhere and blew on it loudly, as a few of the younger guards began beating on drums and gongs.

“How appropriate, this is indeed the time for horns and drums, if I were to pick up the zither now, it would ruin the atmosphere,” Mei Changsu said, smiling as he returned to his chair on the porch and picked up a few chestnuts, peeling them idly as he gazed into the sky lit with fireworks.

As the midnight bell finally ceased its tolling, everyone gathered in the courtyard, and even Aunt Ji came hurrying out from the kitchen with a big ladle in her hand, as they all lined up behind Li Gang and took their turns coming before their Chief to make their new year’s bows, receiving a red packet in return. Most of them were Mei Changsu’s close bodyguards and had accompanied him for many years, but there were a few who had been in the capital all along and so had never received anything in person from the Chief himself, and afterwards, they wandered around speechless with excitement, earning themselves a fond head-rub and a teasing by their seniors, as everyone gathered around, laughing and joking.

From his time in Lang province, Fei Liu had grown accustomed to being the last in line (because he was the youngest), and now he

came forward, kicked aside the cushion on the ground, and knelt directly onto the green-bricked ground, calling loudly, "Happy new year!"

"Be good this year!" Mei Changsu smiled, and placed a red packet into his hands. Although Fei Liu did not understand what this red-wrapped package was for, he knew that everyone was happy when they received it every year, and so obligingly gave a big smile in response.

After receiving their new year's greetings, Mei Changsu rose and went over to Physician Yan to pay his own respects. The old physician looked as if he was still angry at him, and his face tightened at first, but even he was not immune to the joy of the new year, and finally, he puffed on his beard and smiled, patting Mei Changsu's shoulder. "You're one to talk, you have to be good this year too!"

"Yes," Mei Changsu held back a smile, and when he turned back to the courtyard, he discovered that it had dissolved into a chaos of mutual bowing and shouts of new year's greetings.

"Time for dumplings! All you young lads, come and help carry them!" Aunt Ji called from the doorway, and immediately, the crowd flowed towards her. Mei Changsu took Physician Yan by the arm, and the two of them went inside first with Fei Liu, where several large tables had been set up, on which jugs of wine and dishes heaped high with food had been laid out. Steaming plates of dumplings were carried over to the tables, their fragrance filling the room.

Aunt Ji had prepared small plates filled with green onion and vinegar for everyone to put their dumplings in, but the young men pushed aside the little plates and picked up large bowls instead, and Fei Liu, eyes wide, copied them and exchanged his plate for a bowl.

"It looks like only the two of us old men have any manners," Mei

Changsu murmured jokingly to Physician Yan, laughing when he was poked in the side by a sharp finger. He lifted his chopsticks and dipped them in the plate, and at this signal, the crowd leapt forward and quickly demolished the first round of dumplings.

“Why the rush, eh?” Although Aunt Ji’s tone was scolding, she was smiling broadly, happy that her dumplings were in such great demand, and brought out the second round of dumplings straight from the pot, pouring them out onto the empty plates. She carried the two feet wide iron pot, filled to the brim with boiling water and dumplings, without any difficulty, and in any other situation, this feat would have caused jaws to drop in shock, but today, everyone only had eyes for the dumplings themselves, and some even began wielding their chopsticks as swords as they fought over the dwindling pile.

“At least they still know how to take care of their elders.” Physician Yan watched this pack of wolves and tigers, laughing as he shook his head. There was a plate of dumplings before him and Mei Changsu, so they did not need to join in the battle. But as they sat back and watched, it did rather seem like the plates of dumplings on the other tables smelled even better.

“Come, Fei Liu, have this one.” Mei Changsu took a dumpling at random from the plate before him and slid it into Fei Liu’s bowl. Although the youth was second to none when he went to grab for the dumplings, he was afraid to eat them when they were too hot, and so ate very slowly, and after two rounds, he had still only had about ten, and now as they waited for the third round, he could only stare glumly at the empty plates, as everyone around him tried to suppress their smiles.

“The ones on the Chief’s plate aren’t hot any more, Fei Liu, you can eat them in one bite!” Uncle Ji urged.

Fei Liu lifted his bowl obediently and swept the dumpling into his mouth, but he had just bitten down when his eyes widened, his mouth working furiously for a few moments before he spat out a

shining copper coin, which dropped onto the table with a loud plink.

The room erupted into cheerful laughter as many hands suddenly reached towards Fei Liu, their owners crying, "Touch for luck, touch for luck!"

The youth didn't know what was happening and so his instincts took over, and he flew up onto the rafters, immediately prompting a hectic chase, which could not be halted even with the appearance of the third round of Aunt Ji's dumplings. But in the narrow house, although there were many people flying about, not a single ornament was destroyed, and no one succeeded in so much as grasping a corner of Fei Liu's robes. Finally, Mei Changsu stretched out a hand and beckoned the youth over to his side, and held his hand out for everyone to touch.

"Have to touch?" Fei Liu looked as if he was learning a whole new rule, his face full of astonishment.

"That's right, our Fei Liu found the copper coin, which means he is the luckiest person this year, and so everyone wants to touch you for luck."

Fei Liu cocked his head in thought, and suddenly said, "Didn't!"

In the entire house, only Mei Changsu understood what he meant, and he laughed before answering, "Last year, when Lin Chen gege spat out the copper coin, you didn't touch him, is that right?"

"Right!"

"Then it was Lin Chen gege's fault, and next time we see him, our Fei Liu can go and touch him to get it back!" Mei Changsu suggested seriously, and everyone in the room who knew Lin Chen was already clutching their bellies and rolling on the floor in laughter.

Fei Lou thought about it seriously for a moment and couldn't

help shuddering, and shook his head, saying, "Don't want it!"

"Hurry and finish the dumplings, they're getting cold!" Aunt Ji swatted at a few of the young men beside her, shooing them all back to the table, and exchanged Mei Changsu's plate with a set of hot dumplings, urging, "Chief, have a few more."

"That's about enough," Physician Yan stopped her. "Aunt Ji, bring in the congee, Master Su can have a bowl before he retires, although it is the new year, you must not stay up too late."

Mei Changsu was indeed a bit tired, and so smiled in agreement, slowly finished his bowl of hot congee, and returned to his room to sleep. It was entering the early hours of the morning, but the clamor in the city had not died down, and in the excitement, no one noticed the delicate flakes of snow that had begun drifting down from the cold night sky.

Book 4: The Calm Before the Storm

Chapter 67: New Year's Greetings

On the morning of the first day of the new year, the cheerful atmosphere still lingered in the air, and after he got up, Mei Changsu personally selected a lotus-coloured new robe for Fei Liu to wear, and matched it to a light yellow hair tie, a white fox-fur scarf, and a yellow jade belt, dressing up the youth beautifully.

“Fei Liu, Su gege’s going to take you out to pay some new year’s visits, alright?”

“Alright!”

Li Gang came in from the courtyard. “Chief, the palanquin is ready, are we leaving now?”

Mei Changsu looked at him. “Li dage, you will stay in the manor today, you don’t need to go out with me.”

“Chief....” Li Gang stared blankly at him.

“I am keeping you here because I have things for you to do. I don’t usually go out, so most people will think I have stayed home, and come here to pay their new year’s visits. All others aside, if Prince Yu came knocking at our door, you are the only one I trust to receive him on my behalf. I leave this in your hands.”

“I will follow your orders.” Li Gang hurriedly bowed. “Is there some particular reason for Chief going out on purpose to avoid Prince Yu? Please instruct me so I may make adequate preparations.”

“There is no particular reason,” Mei Changsu said indifferently. “I just don’t want to see him on a day like this. Drinking poison is uncomfortable at the best of times, and this is the new year, I want to be in a good mood.”

“Yes, sir....” A flash of sadness passed over Li Gang’s gaze. “I understand. Don’t worry, Chief, I will take good care of the manor in your absence.” Mei Changsu stretched out a hand and patted his

sturdy shoulder gently, then turned, a light smile on his lips as he said, "Fei Liu, let's go."

"Alright!"

On the morning of the first day of the new year, the streets were scattered with the torn fragments of ceremonial burning paper. Although many people were out on the streets, there was not a peddler in sight, and most of the shops were barred shut, except for a few stalls selling candles. Mei Changsu's little palanquin wound through the crowds inconspicuously, finally arriving at a manor half a city away from his own.

Compared to their imperial commander's residence in Yunnan, the imperial Mu residence in the capital was a little smaller, but because it had been built by imperial order in one of the earlier dynasties, it was still very grand. The guards in front of the manor wore the uniform of the cavalry, standing rigidly up to attention, staring straight ahead with stiff alertness.

When Mei Changsu's visiting card was delivered into the manor, although it was not ignored because of its plain appearance, it nonetheless disappeared quickly amongst the pile of cards from high-ranking officials who had come to pay their respects on the first day of the new year, and was slipped in between two similar cards in the stack handed to the little lord, who invited each person in one by one, offering him tea and chatting with him for a little while before sending him away. This went on for almost an hour before he finally came to the card bearing the name "Su Zhe".

At first, Mu Qing stared at the card, turning it this way and that, but he finally decided that there was really only one person in this world who would send him a card with the words "Su Zhe" written on it, without any other title or explanation of identity.

"Little lord?" The steward looked uneasily at the changing expressions passing over his master's face. "You do not want to see this one?"

Mu Qing lifted his head dazedly and glanced at him, then his lips twitched and he suddenly leapt to his feet, shouting “Jiejie!” loudly as he ran towards the inner courtyard.

Moments later, the herald of the Mu residence, Wei Jingan came out and brought all the other guests into a side hall where he took over the task of entertaining them, and Princess Nihuang and Mu Qing personally came to the outer gates to receive Mei Changsu, who was falling asleep on his palanquin.

“Mister Su, my deepest apologies, I didn’t....” Nihuang began apologetically, but was stopped by Su Zhe’s smile.

“It was only a little wait, no matter, and anyway I have much time at leisure today.” Mei Changsu said reassuringly as he walked into the little parlour, side by side with Nihuang, and sat down in the guest seat. Mu Qing saw Fei Liu standing beside Mei Changsu and hurriedly ordered for a chair to be brought for him, but Fei Liu was not willing to sit, and after standing there for a little while, disappeared to who knew where.

“Fei Liu finds this place new, so he will run around to look and play,” Mei Changsu explained when he saw Mu Qing look around him in surprise, guessing what he was thinking. He added, “Would that be any trouble?”

“No, no, let him go wherever he likes.” Because Mu Qing was similar in age to Fei Liu, he had always been curious about this young bodyguard. “He is so quick, I couldn’t even see how he left.”

“So now you’re envious of other people? Why didn’t you listen when I told you to go practice your martial arts? I told you you were being lazy,” Nihuang scolded.

“Jiejie,” Mu Qing wheedled, “I’m not lazy, I’m just a slow learner....”

“It is said that diligence is the cure for clumsiness, since you know your weakness, all the more reason to work harder to

compensate for it.”

Mu Qing scowled. “Jiejie, it’s the new year and there’s a guest here, don’t scold me....”

Mei Changsu looked at his little Nihuang, who had grown up into such a fierce older sister, and who was now even teaching her younger brother, and a mix of grief and amusement rose in his heart as he broke in to say, “The Southern border is peaceful at present, so Lord Mu does not need to go out to battle, and you can take your time refining your martial arts, it is more important to study military command and strategy as well as the ruling of the South.”

“Did you hear that? Remember well Mister Su’s words. If you keep acting like you haven’t grown up, how can I hand Yunnan over to you in the future?”

“The Princess does not need to worry,” Mei Changsu said soothingly. “Lord Mu only lacks training, he already possesses the air of a general. Why not take advantage of the peace at the borders and gradually transition some of the ruling duties to him, and in time, I am sure he will be an outstanding lord.”

“Jiejie has already given me many things to do. Like the guests who came today – I was the one who met them all, that’s why you were accidentally overlooked.” Mu Qing laughed, then turned to Nihuang. “Jiejie, you spent so long back there, have you finished making them?”

Mei Changsu couldn’t help asking curiously, “Making what?”

“Jiejie is personally making new year’s cakes for us to eat.” Mu Qing answered. “She never used to enter the kitchens, but I guess she sees that I’ve grown up, so these past two years, jiejie has started learning to cook.”

Mei Changsu smiled. He knew very well why the mighty lady commander of the Southern border had begun trying her hand at

the culinary arts, and although things were still slightly awkward between them at the moment, his happiness for her was completely sincere.

“In that case, I have come just in time, how could I miss the opportunity to taste the Princess’ handiwork?” He turned to Nihuang and lowered his voice. “Don’t worry, I know his tastes, I can give you some suggestions.”

Nihuang lowered her eyes, a complicated mix of feelings clouding her gaze, but she knew this was not the time to argue about certain matters, so she only smiled and rose, saying, “Then I must go, there is still one more step, I will go finish. Xiao Qing, take good care of Mister Su.”

“Alright.” Mu Qing waited for his sister to leave, then waved all the servants away before shifting to a seat beside Su Zhe to say quietly, “I always thought that person was you? Is it really not you?”

Mei Changsu was taken aback. “What? The lord has never seen that person?”

“No, when they went off to war, they said I was too young, and left me behind to look after our home, and it was only afterwards when I heard Zhangsun talking that I found out jiejie had been in such great danger, and that such a person had appeared. Although he has saved our Southern border army, he actually dared to run from a goddess like my sister, so he can’t amount to much.”

“The lord’s words are too harsh. Each person has his own difficulties, who is anyone else to judge? He is one of my closest friends, I know him very well.....the lord does not need to worry, he is a kind and honest man, loyal, righteous, and brave, as well as a rare prodigy of a marines officer. He has a bright nature, and a dignified and handsome appearance. He is certainly worth the Princess’ regard and admiration.”

“But why did he run?” Mu Qing was still pouting. “He’s your

subordinate, isn't he? Tell him to come to the capital....”

“Lord Mu, this is your sister's private matter, she will know how to handle it, you only have to support her decision, and as for the rest.....do not interfere too much.”

Mu Qing scratched his head. “I know all this, but I can't help caring about it.....actually, there are plenty of admirable men in our manor, why doesn't jiejie like one of them, like Zhangsun....”

“Don't say anymore,” Mei Changsu reminded him softly. “The Princess is coming.”

Mu Qing jumped up in fright. “Jie.....jie, jiejie!”

“Are you saying bad things about me? Why do you look so scared?” Nihuang, leading two servant girls bearing boxes of food towards them, eyed her younger brother suspiciously.

“No.....how would I dare.....”

Mei Changsu couldn't help silently praising Nihuang's deft and thoughtful handling of the situation. If the Princess' handmade new year cakes were only offered to Su Zhe, it could easily lead to gossip and speculation, but now as she invited all the other generals of the imperial Mu residence over to join them, it became just another new year's celebration.

In a little while, the five generals and two historians of the Southern border army who had entered the capital with their commander followed Mu Qing over to pay their greetings, and the little parlour rapidly grew crowded.

But although there were many people, Nihuang had made two full boxes of the cakes, and so there was certainly enough to go around.

“Mister Su, please.”

Mei Changsu smiled as he took a piece, then turned his head and called, “Fei Liu, come try some.”

“Fei Liu’s here?” Mu Qing quickly raised his head, looking around, but a blur flew past him and then the handsome youth was already seated by Mei Changsu’s side, reaching out to take a piece of cake from the box and placing it into his mouth.

“Everyone, please, help yourselves.” Nihuang smiled, “How do they taste?”

By this time, everyone had tried a piece, and the compliments came trickling in: “The Princess is a great cook....”

“Very good....”

“The taste is exquisite...”

“Truly sweet but not too rich....”

“Crisp and delicious....”

Amongst the words of praise, Fei Liu suddenly interjected coldly, “Tastes bad!”

The entire room froze, and even Mu Qing began sweating, not knowing what to say to lighten the mood, afraid to lift their heads to look at the Princess’ expression.

But this awkward state did not last for long, as Mei Changsu snorted and began to laugh, one hand covering his mouth, until he started coughing. Following closely behind him was Princess Nihuang herself, who laughed so hard she bent over double, and everyone else exchanged a glance before following suit, so that soon, the room was filled with their laughter, the earlier embarrassment having dissipated completely.

“Finally, someone speaks the truth,” Nihuang wiped at the tears in her eyes. “I tried some myself before we came out, and I was just thinking, if you all kept raining down compliments like that, then I’ll make them for you every day!”

“It’s really not so bad, there was only a little too much sugar, they look very nice anyway,” Mei Changsu said encouragingly.

“You will find the right amount with a bit more practice.”

Mu Qing was about to chime in when he suddenly saw Wei Jingan hurrying towards them, his face very serious, and was taken aback, asking, “Old Wei, what’s wrong?”

“Princess, little lord,” Wei Jingan cupped his hands and bowed, then continued lowly, “I have just discovered that something happened last night just outside the walls of the palace.”

Chapter 68: Murder on New Year's Eve

“Last night? But last night was New Year's Eve, what could possibly happen?” Mu Qing asked, jumping to his feet.

“Does the little lord know about His Majesty the Emperor's custom of bestowing twelve new year's dishes to different houses?”

“Yes, we received a bowl of pigeon's eggs.....couldn't the Emperor have sent us something better.....”

“Xiao Qing!” Nihuang said reprovngly. “You're always fooling around and making jokes, let Herald Wei finish.”

Mu Qing shrank back, not daring to say another word.

“The new year's dishes are delivered by internal guards, five to a group,” Wei Jingan continued. “Last night, naturally twelve such groups were sent out. But by sunrise, only eleven had returned. When they received the news, the Imperial Guard and the Capital Patrol set out together, and discovered five bodies just outside the palace walls.”

“Bodies? They were killed?” Nihuang raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, the assassins were extremely skilled, and killed them with one stroke, so that the expressions of the dead looked peaceful, their clothes clean and undisturbed, with no sign of a struggle, as if their lives had been extinguished in mid-air.”

“This kind of skill must be the work of jianghu experts.” Nihuang thought for a moment, then asked, “Is there any direction of inquiry? Was there no clue or sign left behind at the scene?”

As soon as these questions left her lips, she saw Mei Changsu solemnly hold up a hand to stop her.

“Mister Su....”

“We may leave the matter of the assassins to a later time,” Mei

Changsu's gaze fell onto Wei Jingan's face. "Tell me first about Commander General Meng, how is he?"

Wei Jingan saw that Su Zhe had immediately grasped the reason he had hurried over to give this report, and a look of admiration appeared over his face. "Commander General Meng is not doing so well. The incident took place on the eve of the new year, just outside the palace, virtually at the feet of the Emperor, and the murdered were imperial messengers and internal guards, so it is indeed a severe provocation of the imperial might and power, and His Majesty was livid when he heard the news. Because the events took place on the near shore of the river, just outside the palace wall, it was still within the territory guarded by the Imperial Guard, so Commander Meng must bear the responsibility for the incident. His Majesty accused him of neglecting his duty and failing to provide sufficient guards and protection, leading to such an inauspicious murder on the eve of the New Year, and sentenced him to twenty lashes by the rod on the spot...."

"Lashes by the rod?" Mei Changsu's eyebrows furrowed. "Still as ruthless as ever.....what happened after that?"

"He ordered Commander Meng to solve the case and capture the persons responsible within thirty days, or else.....there would be further punishment."

"What is the Emperor thinking?" Mu Qing had leapt to his feet again, unable to help himself. "Commander Meng is loyal and devoted, his work in guarding the palace all these years has not gone unnoticed, and even if he is to blame for these events, the Emperor cannot vent all his anger onto him, how can he be so unfair...."

"Xiao Qing!" Nihuang's voice was stern. "You presume to doubt your lord, do you think before you speak?"

"There are no outsiders here...." Mu Qing mumbled, and then swallowed the rest of his words.

Nihuang concentrated for a moment, then turned to look at Mei Changsu, who was sitting quietly in deep thought, rubbing his forehead, and didn't dare disturb him, but turned again and said in a low voice, "Herald Wei, please continue to investigate this matter, and if there are any new developments, come report them immediately."

"Understood."

"Generals, please feel free to take your leave, this news will spread soon enough, but I do not want to hear anyone in the imperial Mu residence gossiping or discussing these events. I must depend on you all to restrain your subordinates."

"We will follow your orders!"

"Xiao Qing, go back to your room right now and face the walls and meditate for four hours. How many times do I have to scold you before you change that reckless, impatient temper of yours?"

"Jiejie...."

"Go!"

"Yes...."

In the blink of an eye, the crowd in the room had receded away like the tide, and finally, Nihuang walked slowly back to Mei Changsu's side and knelt down in front of him, asking in a low voice, "Lin Shu gege, you and Commander Meng are very close, is that right?"

Mei Changsu raised his eyes and nodded lightly, "Yes."

"Do you want Nihuang to go into the palace to beg for mercy on his behalf?"

Mei Changsu sighed lightly and shook his head. "This is not necessary for now. I am not worried about his current condition, but for how these events will play out in the future...."

"In the future?"

“Although the imperial power is difficult to fathom, the Emperor is not a foolish man, and he will not remove Meng Zhi from his post over the Imperial Guard and his power over the palace’s protection because of this one case alone. He may scold him and sentence him to a lashing, but he is only venting his rage, and Commander Meng is able to endure this. Unfortunately, this beating is not the end, and if he does not solve the case within thirty days, or, if new cases continue to occur in the future, then the Emperor’s regard for Meng Zhi will become lower and lower, and therein lies the true danger....”

“New cases?” Nihuang was astonished. “You’re saying there will be more....”

“This is only my feeling.” Mei Changsu reached out a hand and pulled Nihuang up to sit by his side, explaining, “Think about it, there must be a motive behind any murder, so why would anyone want to kill five internal guards? A crime of passion is certainly impossible, and as for revenge? What kind of great enmity could an ordinary internal guard create, that would get him killed so publicly just outside the palace walls? Robbery? They would not have much money or any valuables on their persons, and their clothes were not disturbed..... After eliminating the most common motives for murder, there is one more reason for killing in the world of jianghu, and that is the fight between experts, where each tries to elevate his name and reputation, but these five internal guards were outsiders without any reputation, and did not have any martial art skills to speak of..... so in the end, the reason they were killed cannot be related to their persons, but rather to their positions.”

Nihuang nodded as she listened. “That is to say, the assassins only wanted to murder internal guards sent out of the palace by the Emperor, but didn’t care which guard they killed.”

“That should be the case.” Mei Changsu was thinking aloud. “But why did they want to kill imperial messengers? To infuriate the

Emperor, as a show of force against him? To test the power of the Imperial Guard, as a preparation for further action? Or...was it all along a direct blow towards Meng dage, to shake the Emperor's trust in him..... no matter which of these was the true goal, they will not stop at killing these five guards."

"But...just from the information we have at present, there is no way to predict the true motive of the assassins?"

"Nihuang, you must remember, if you do not know in which direction your enemy is going to fire his arrow, you must first protect that which is most crucial to yourself. As long as you do not die by the first stroke, there will be time to take care of other matters, and to rectify them slowly." Mei Changsu smiled faintly. "Like now, we must first protect Meng dage, and once we have more information, we can consider how to retaliate. Besides, as long as Meng dage still commands the Imperial Guard, nothing worse than this can happen in the palace."

Nihuang thought it over, and gradually, her eyes brightened. "I understand. We first presume that their target is Commander Meng, in order to verify what our next step should be."

"Very good," Mei Changsu smiled in praise. "From the current situation, the murder of these five guards does not really affect the safety of the palace, so their most likely goal is to weaken the Emperor's trust in the Imperial Guard, and the goal behind weakening the Imperial Guard is of course to control the palace. So if we extrapolate one step further, the people who want to control the palace must naturally be those closest to the center of power."

"The Crown Prince and Prince Yu...." Nihuang murmured.

"Yes, one of the two. But Prince Yu does not have anyone in the military, so even if he brings down Meng Zhi, he would not be able to find anyone he trusts to take over the position. As for the Crown Prince...." Mei Changsu glanced meaningfully at Nihuang. "He does have someone...."

“The Marquis of Ning, Xie Yu!” Nihuang’s palms came together as she suddenly understood. “Xie Yu is a first-ranked military marquis, is beloved of the Emperor, holds the Capital Patrol in his hands, and has plenty of people in his command, so if the Imperial Guard is suppressed, or if Commander Meng loses his position, he is the only one who can take over....”

“This is the logical conclusion. But.....the Emperor is not so confused yet, he has an exceedingly great amount of trust in Meng Zhi, and no matter how much he shouts and rages, he is still far from stripping him of his position....” Mei Changsu’s brow wrinkled. “And so I think, if this is truly Xie Yu’s work, he will definitely have other plans in store....”

“Would it be as you said just now, creating an incessant downpour of new cases, murders every day, so that the Emperor will lose his trust in the Imperial Guard’s abilities?”

“From this day forward, Meng Zhi will certainly reorganize his troops and tighten his control, so another murder will be difficult to accomplish....”

“But in such a large palace, there are always neglected places, and sometimes, it is simply impossible to defend against people as malicious as Xie Yu.”

“You have a point....” Mei Changsu closed his eyes, resting his head on the back of his chair as he murmured, “But if I were Xie Yu, I would not stop at something as simple as murder.....if I were to remove the Emperor’s faith in Meng Zhi, then I must target the Emperor’s weakness....”

Mei Changsu’s eyes flew open, his dark pupils staring for a moment before he suddenly rose from his chair.

“Lin Shu gege?”

“The Emperor’s weakness is his suspicion!” Mei Changsu took a deep breath and then spoke quickly. “The reason he trusts Meng

Zhi so much is because he is certain that Meng Zhi has always been completely loyal to him, and has never had private relations with those two little masters. But if, at this crucial moment, Xie Yu tricks Prince Yu into going before the Emperor to plead for Meng Zhi, then the situation will deteriorate.”

“Would Prince Yu fall into his trap so easily?”

“Prince Yu is too desperate for a sword. Ever since the Duke of Qing fell, he does not have a single shred of military power in his grasp. Even if everyone knows he is on good terms with Prince Jing now, it is still only a symbolic support, but if he could attain the support of the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, he would be laughing in his sleep.” Mei Changsu’s brows were furrowing tighter and tighter. “To trick him into doing this is not difficult at all, you only have to find a way to get the news to him, saying that Commander Meng was scolded and beaten by the Emperor because this murder case took place within the palace boundaries, and that His Highness the Crown Prince hurried over in secret to protest against the unfairness of the treatment, and then do you think Prince Yu would be content to sit aside and let the Crown Prince steal away this precious means of support? He would definitely rush into the palace to defend Meng Zhi before the Emperor, so that, even if he cannot obtain the Commander General’s gratitude, at least he will not let him be seized by the Crown Prince....”

As Nihuang listened, her face gradually paled. “With His Majesty’s suspicious nature, and with the way the wind is blowing, as soon as he sees Prince Yu defending Commander Meng so fiercely, he will immediately suspect that there is some deep relationship between them. And if the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, who is responsible for protecting the palace, has any kind of relationship with a prince who is fighting for the throne, then this is something the Emperor would definitely not tolerate.”

“This is a ruthless game of chess, and the target of the pieces is the Emperor’s heart.” Mei Changsu gritted his teeth. “Xie Yu is actually capable of such a move.....Nihuang, keep an eye on the situation, I must go immediately to the imperial Yu residence.”

“Yes.” Nihuang knew of Mei Changsu’s eloquence, and knew that stopping Prince Yu from falling into this trap without leaving a trace of his own involvement would not be a difficult task for him, and so did not ask any further, but accompanied him to the main gates, watching as he hurried onto his palanquin before turning to return to the study, summoning Wei Jingan over to discuss how best to conduct the next steps of their investigation.

But neither Nihuang nor Mei Changsu could have predicted that, although they had already received the news very quickly, and had analyzed the situation and predicted the actions of everyone involved with perfect accuracy, they were still one step too slow.

One hour before Mei Changsu arrived at his manor, Prince Yu had already left for the palace.

Chapter 69: Gaining Trust

Mei Changsu had initially planned to first persuade Prince Yu not to plead for Meng Zhi, and then to make a trip to the Xuanjing Bureau to ask Xia Dong whether the Emperor intended to have the Xuanjing Bureau assist in the investigation. But now that he had arrived a step too late, and Prince Yu had likely already reached the palace, he feared any move he made would be seen as acting on Prince Yu's behalf, so the best option was to hold still for now and watch how things developed.

On the road back to the Su manor, Mei Changsu sat with his eyes closed on his palanquin, re-examining the current situation from every angle. Prince Yu entering the palace to defend Meng Zhi would certainly raise the Emperor's suspicions towards the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, and although he would not express this sentiment in his actions for now, at the very least, the Emperor would not allow Meng Zhi to continue the investigation of the murder of the internal guards alone, and would definitely send the Xuanjing Officers to investigate the case simultaneously. Since Xie Yu had made his move knowing full well that the Xuanjing Officers would become involved sooner or later, that meant he was very confident that he had not left any evidence behind at the scene of the crime. As a first-ranked military official, even if Xia Dong suspected him, she could not report him to the Emperor without proof or evidence. Besides, in the current delicate atmosphere of the fight for the throne, any accusation without proof or evidence would be called out by the opposite side as "purposeful framing", and would not only fail to attain its goal, it would even have the opposite effect.

So now, the most crucial step was to find evidence, but this was extremely difficult. The assassins' work had been swift and clean, without leaving behind any hint of their identities, and naturally no proof could be found there, not to mention that the murder had

taken place on New Year's Eve, and the roads surrounding the palace walls had been empty, and so there had been no witnesses. Aside from assuming that Xie Yu was behind it all and by extension carefully investigating Zhuo Dingfeng, there were practically no leads to be followed.

Mei Changsu let out a deep sigh, and feeling that the palanquin was a little stuffy, he reached out a hand to draw aside the curtain, intending to let in some fresh air.

It was near noon, and there were many people out on the streets, most of them hurrying about dressed in new clothes for the new year, gifts in their hands and bright smiles on their faces, as if all worries and troubles had been put aside because it was the first day of the new year.

Mei Changsu smiled ruefully and was just about to lower the curtain when he suddenly caught sight of a grey-robed youth.

The youth, around twelve to thirteen years old, was average in height and dressed plainly, and would ordinarily not have caught Mei Changsu's attention. But what made him stand out from the crowd was that, as soon as he caught sight of the little green palanquin, he immediately stood off to the side of the road, lifting his arms and bending over to bow respectfully in the palanquin's direction.

"Stop." Mei Changsu hurriedly ordered the two guards who were serving as his palanquin bearers to stop at the side of the road, and then pulled open the curtain and leaned out to wave at the youth.

The youth was taken aback for a moment, then immediately hurried over at a half-run and knelt and pressed his head to the ground, bowing to Mei Changsu as he said lowly, "I bring New Year's greetings to Mister Su, and wish him great fortune and good health in the coming year."

"Oh, it's Shuhong, have you come out by yourself?"

“Yes.”

Shuhong was one of the two criminal slaves who had been rescued from the Secluded Court along with Tingsheng. At the time, when the three were being taught the martial arts steps they needed to fight Baili Qi, Fei Liu was the one who had taken over the majority of the training, and Mei Changsu had spent most of his energy on Tingsheng, and had not paid much attention to the other two children. In addition, Shuhong had a quiet character and did not speak much, and since he had entered the imperial Jing residence with its structured but comfortable lifestyle, where he was provided with abundant food and clothing, he had grown tall and strong, and so Mei Changsu had not immediately recognized him.

“I hear Tingsheng is ill, is he feeling better?”

“The doctor said the cold energy has already dissipated, and he will be able to leave his bed after two more doses of medicine.”

Mei Changsu nodded. He had initially planned to have the three children over to the Su residence on New Year’s Eve, but the plans had been cancelled because Tingsheng had fallen sick and couldn’t get out of bed. But he knew very well that Prince Jing would take good care of Tingsheng, and so had not been worried, and now that he heard what Shuhong had to say, he knew it was likely just an ordinary bout of illness.

“Did you come out to buy medicine for Tingsheng?” Mei Changsu asked, looking at the medicine bag in Shuhong’s hands.

“Yes.”

“The three of you went through difficult times together in the palace, so you must take care of each other, and support each other.” Mei Changsu reached out to pat Shuhong’s head, saying gently, “You are two years older than both of them, so you must bear the responsibility of a dage.”

“Ng!” Shuhong nodded firmly, his gaze filled with admiration. “Mister Su, I have been studying and training hard, and in the future, whether on the battlefield or in the scholarly arts, I will not let you down.”

“Very good, boys should have ambitions and heroic spirits, in the future, it will be up to you to serve our Emperor and our country,” Mei Changsu said encouragingly. “It’s cold, hurry and go back. Remember to take good care of Tingsheng.”

“Yes!” Shuhong answered as he retreated to one side, then stood still at attention. Mei Changsu saw how serious this child was about etiquette and courtesy, and knew that he would not leave if he himself did not leave first, and so smiled at him and then ordered the guards to continue on their way.

When the palanquin stopped in the inner courtyard of the Su manor, Li Gang came forward to support him, asking, “Chief, why have you come back so early? Prince Yu has not come yet....”

“I know, he will not come today.” Mei Changsu hurried indoors, pulling off his cloak as he walked. Although the house was empty, the brazier burned brightly, spreading warmth through the room in preparation for the return of its master. Mei Changsu sat down onto the soft chair, and Li Gang was already ordering people to bring in hot towels and freshly-boiled soup.

“Has Tong Lu come today?”

“Yes. He wanted to wait for the Chief, but I didn’t know you would be back so soon, so I sent him away.....does the Chief wish to see him?”

“No matter. Tell the Heaven’s Secret sect of our alliance to find out, as soon as possible, which martial arts experts Zhuo Dingfeng has had contact with recently and which among them have entered the capital, and tell Mister Shisan to closely monitor all of the swords-masters in the capital, no matter what sects they belong to. And put a surveillance around the Xie manor, I want Zhuo

Dingfeng and his eldest son Zhuo Qingyao's every move reported back to me immediately. Understand?"

"I understand." Li Gang had an exceptional memory, and he fluidly repeated the instructions once before immediately leaving to carry them out.

Mei Chang leaned back in his chair, picking up the visiting cards on the little table beside him and flipping through them absently. They likely belonged to some of the officials in Prince Yu's camp who had sent people over to pay the required respects. Likely, Li Gang had felt it unnecessary to report these, and so had placed them to one side for Mei Changsu to peruse at his leisure.

Fei Liu appeared noiselessly into the room, a snowy white messenger pigeon on his arm, his handsome little face pulled tight as he came to Mei Changsu's side and handed the pigeon to him before dropping to the ground beside him and burying his face into Su gege's leg.

Mei Changsu smiled as he stroked the youth's neck, then he took out a roll of paper from a tube on the pigeon's foot and unfurled it. A gleam of light flashed across his eyes, but in the next instant, he resumed his deep, calm gaze as he casually tossed the paper into the brazier.

The little pigeon was startled by the flame, and cocked its head as it cried out, "Gu, gu." Mei Changsu patted its little head with his fingertips as he said, "Don't cry, Fei Liu has been unhappy ever since he saw you, if you keep crying, he will pluck out your feathers."

"Don't any more!" Fei Liu protested, raising his head suddenly.

"But our Fei Liu wants to pluck them very much, it is only that he does not dare." Mei Changsu pinched his cheek. "Last time you were locked in the dark room, wasn't that because you hid one of Lin Chen gege's messenger pigeons?"

“Won’t any more!” Fei Liu’s cheeks were puffed in anger.

“I know you will not do so again,” Mei Changsu praised him with a smile. “You were very good today, even though you were unhappy, you still brought it in to see me, and didn’t hide it like last time....”

“Very good!”

“Yes, very good. Go bring Su gege a piece of paper, and the dip the smallest quill in ink, alright?”

“Alright!”

Fei Liu jumped up, and very quickly, paper and quill were brought over. Mei Changsu wrote a few small words onto the edge of the paper, tore out the strip, rolled it up and placed it into the tube, then gave the pigeon back to Fei Liu.

“Fei Liu can go and release it, alright?”

Fei Liu got up slowly, a little unwillingly, but when he saw Mei Changsu smiling at him, he obediently took the pigeon out into the courtyard and threw it up into the air, watching as it flew a few circles around the yard before disappearing into the distance.

As the snowy white pigeon flew further and further away, becoming nothing more than a spot, Fei Liu still watched, his head lifted towards the sky. Li Gang, a gold visiting card in his hand, was coming in from the outer yard, and seeing Fei Liu standing there in this posture, he couldn’t help laughing. “Fei Liu, are you waiting for a fairy to drop out of the sky?”

“No!” Fei Liu’s tone was a little angry.

“Alright, alright, alright, you take your time waiting.”

“No!” Very angry.

Li Gang grinned as he dodged Fei Liu’s punch, but once he passed the doors of the house, he immediately grew serious.

“Chief, Master Yan has come to visit.”

Mei Changsu eyed the visiting card doubtfully and laughed in spite of himself. "He has always come in directly laughing and shouting, when has he learned such courtesy? I fear he has something to say, ask him to come in then."

"Yes." Not long after Li Gang retreated, Yan Yujin strode in quickly, dressed in a bright red cloak, giving off his usual elegant and radiant air, so that if you did not look closely, you would not have found anything unusual about his expression.

"Yujin has arrived, please sit." Mei Changsu's glance passed casually over the faintly pink eyelids of the son of the Imperial Uncle, and he ordered Li Gang to have refreshments sent up.

"Brother Su, you do not have to be polite." Yan Yujin half-rose out of his chair to accept his tea, but when Li Gang and the rest of the servants left, he put down the tea cup and rose immediately, clasping his hands towards Mei Changsu in a bow.

"I don't dare, I don't dare," Mei Changsu smilingly rose to lift him up. "You and I are of the same generation, this is not the correct bow."

"Brother Su, you know very well Yujin's bow is not for the new year," Yujin said with rare seriousness. "It is to thank Brother Su for saving the lives of the entire Yan clan."

Mei Changsu patted his arm, indicating for him to sit, and said slowly, "Marquis Yan has already...."

"Last night, Father told me everything," Yan Yujin lowered his head, his face pale. "If I say that Father has neglected me in the past, then as his son, I have never known the suffering in his heart, and I cannot claim to be a filial son...."

"That the two of you have been able to come to a mutual understanding is indeed a cause for joy and celebration," Mei Changsu smiled warmly. "As for the matter for which I saved your esteemed father, you do not need to hold it in your heart. The

affairs of the palace are changing rapidly, and the unrest is becoming unmanageable, so it was only that I did not want your esteemed father's actions to cause any further disturbance and lead to uncontrollable chaos, that's all."

Yan Yujin looked at him closely. "I do not want to look closely into the reason behind Brother Su's decision, but I believe there is friendship in it. To tell the truth, even now, my father does not regret the plans he made and the actions he took, but he is still grateful that you stopped him. Although this sounds contradictory, a person's feelings are often this complicated, and it is not a matter that can be easily divided into black and white, nor neatly cut into two halves by a knife. But, no matter what, the peace of the Yan clan has been kept, and I have only to remember Brother Su's goodwill. As for other, more complicated reasons, what do they have to do with me?"

Mei Changsu looked at him for a long moment, and then suddenly laughed in spite of himself. "You are indeed even smarter than I imagined. Although you may appear a bit frivolous, you are still a dependable pillar of support to those you count as your friends."

"Brother Su is too kind," Yan Yujin smiled back. "No one can predict the fate of our clan, or what we will face in the future. The only thing in our grasp is this heart, and nothing more."

"Well-said, that deserves a toast." Mei Changsu nodded, smiling. "Unfortunately, I am still taking medicine, and cannot accompany you."

"I will drink for Brother Su." Yan Yujin said brightly, and he rose and went to the courtyard to find Li Gang, asking him bring them a casket of wine and two cups, and so with a cup in his left hand and one in his right, he lightly knocked them together, and then drained them both.

"You and Jingrui are such good friends, but you have very

different temperaments,” Mei Changsu couldn’t help sighing ruefully. “But he is also working hard, he must be taking care of four parents at home these days.”

“He never comes out on the first day of the new year, he has to keep them happy,” Yan Yujin said with a smile. “Even if I want to find him, I have to wait until the second day of the new year.”

Mei Changsu glanced at him and said casually, “Then bring him over here tomorrow. You see how quiet it is here, I don’t have many other friends.”

“Of course, I only fear Xie Bi will want to come as well. That’s right, Xie Xu has come back from his academy for the new year, have you met him yet?”

“The third son of the Xie family?”

“That’s right, although he is the youngest, he is the best at classics and history, and Uncle Xie hopes he will achieve top rank in the imperial examinations, so he sent him to study at the Songshan Academy, he only comes back for the new year, and it’s always Qingyao dage who goes to pick him up.”

“I’ve heard it said that after Zhuo Qingyao married the eldest Xie daughter, Xie Bi will also be marrying the daughter of the Zhuo family?”

“Ng, I think Jingrui has said there is such an arrangement.”

“The Xie and Zhuo families have married their children, and there is Jingrui, so they have really become like one family.”

“That’s right. Although they once fought over Jingrui, now they have become as close as a family, it’s a classic example of good coming out of bad.”

Mei Changsu smiled indifferently and did not continue the topic, but casually turned the conversation to another subject. Not long afterwards, Physician Yan came in with a bowl brimming full of medicine, and Yan Yujin was worried about disturbing Mei

Changsu's rest, so he got up and took his leave.

After drinking the medicine, Mei Changsu leaned back on the soft couch and slept for four hours, and after he woke up, he received a few trivial guests before going back to his book.

As night fell and the lamps were lit, Fei Liu started setting off fireworks in the courtyard again. Mei Changsu, smiling, watched from the room until he finished, and then lightly waved him over.

“Want to play?”

“No, Su gege doesn't want to play,” Mei Changsu smiled as he leaned close to his ear. “Fei Liu, let's go secretly visit Uncle Meng, alright?”

Chapter 70: Night Visit to Meng Manor

As the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, Meng Zhi often had night duty in the palace, and even on the days he was not on duty, he mostly stayed at the Commander's Bureau taking care of business, and it was only when he had two or more days off in a row that he would return to his own private manor.

Although its master had an illustrious reputation in the capital, the Meng residence was plain in appearance, with only around ten to twenty servants, and the household was not run very strictly. But Meng Zhi was the first-ranked martial arts expert of Da Liang, and he was not a jianghu man, so there were basically never any visitors who came to the manor looking for trouble, and so the residence had always been peaceful and had never seen any great commotion.

Meng Zhi's first wife had been chosen for him when he was young by his father and mother, and although she came from a very poor upbringing, she was a person of exceeding virtue and integrity. That year, when Meng Zhi left to join the military, she was the one who stayed behind to take care of both their parents. She had miscarried once and had never conceived a child again, but Meng Zhi did not take a concubine because of this, adopting one of his nephews as his heir instead, and the two loved and respected one another, and had a very good relationship.

This time, when Meng Zhi returned to the manor after receiving his punishment, the entire household was in a panic, and it was only Mistress Meng who remained calm, bringing doctors into the manor and instructing the guards to turn away all other guests at the door, stabilizing the overall situation. Meng Zhi did not mention the reason for the beating, and she did not ask, only concerning herself with his health and waiting on him attentively, and it was only after her husband fell asleep in the evening that she too lay down to sleep, still fully dressed.

As she was falling asleep, there was a tap on the window and she started awake again, but before she could speak, her husband's hand was on her shoulder.

"Who is it?" Meng Zhi asked in a deep voice.

"Us!" A bright, clear voice answered.

A smile broke out over Meng Zhi's face, and he said quietly to his wife, "They are my guests, you can open the door."

Mistress Meng hurriedly threw on a cloak and lit the lamp on the table before opening the door to the room, looking out to see a young scholar in dark robes and a light fur cloak standing outside, a handsome youth with a cold face behind him.

"I am sorry to disturb the mistress," the scholar apologized gently.

"Since you are my husband's friends, please put aside the courtesies, quick, come in." Mistress Meng stood aside to let the two enter, then went over to the brazier to pick up the teapot which had been placed beside it and served tea for her guests. She also filled two dishes with candies and brought them over, then said in a low voice, "My husband, I will go to the next room."

"You must be tired today too, go to sleep there," Meng Zhi said hurriedly.

Mistress Meng smiled but did not reply, and then left the room, thoughtfully closing the door after herself.

"To have a wife such as this is Meng dage's good fortune," Mei Changsu praised, before he asked concernedly, "Is your injury severe?"

"I practice a hard and stiff style of martial arts, what are a few sticks of bamboo to me? It was only to sooth His Majesty's anger, and to let him see a bit of blood, that's all."

Mei Changsu knew he was loyal and devoted to his monarch, and

so did not comment, only asking, “You work so hard day and night, but as soon as a case like this appears, the Emperor turns hostile against you, are you disappointed?”

Meng Zhi waved a hand and said, “The Emperor has always been like this, and as the servant, how could I hope for my lord to change his nature for my sake? Besides, the case did take place in the territory under the control of the Imperial Guard, so the blame should fall on my shoulders, the Emperor has not treated me unjustly.”

A cold smile turned up the corner of Mei Changsu’s lip as he turned towards the lamp, his gaze flickering faintly, as he asked again, “Did Prince Yu enter the palace to plead for you?”

“I was wondering about that too, we’ve never had much interaction in the past, yet he was kind enough to come and plead on my behalf this time, it’s too bad that perhaps he said something wrong, after he left, I saw the Emperor looking even more furious than before.”

“.....do you know why the Emperor became even angrier? Was it really because Prince Yu doesn’t know how to speak?”

Meng Zhi was taken aback. “I hadn’t thought about it, could it be.....there was something wrong with what Prince Yu did?”

“You are the Commander General who holds a hundred thousand imperial guards in the palm of your hand, to put it bluntly, the life of the Emperor lies within your grasp. Now, as soon as the slightest bit of trouble arises, a prince appears immediately to intercede for you, and not just any prince, but Prince Yu, who just happens to have certain intentions towards the throne, so, with the understanding you have developed for the Emperor over these years, what do you think his first instinct will be?”

At his words, Meng Zhi immediately broke out in a cold sweat, his body trembling. “But.....but.....I.....if the Emperor suspects me of something like that, then he would truly be accusing me

unjustly.....”

“Unjust?” Mei Changsu couldn’t hold back his bitter smile. “You want to cry ‘unjust’ before this master, is this your first day meeting him?”

Meng Zhi’s hands slowly clenched into fists, his brow furrowed. “The Emperor has commanded me to solve the case within one month, this is not my area of strength and there are no leads to follow, and now Prince Yu has come up with something like this....”

“Prince Yu did not intend to harm you, he only wanted to take the opportunity to win you over to his side,” Mei Changsu smiled. “But this case truly cannot be solved.”

Meng Zhi stared at him, dumbfounded. He knew his own investigation skills were not strong, and feared he would not be able to unravel this mess, but from the beginning, he had taken it for granted that Mei Changsu would investigate the matter for him, and so had never worried, but now, hearing this conclusion, he was too shocked to react.

“When a month has passed, you can go before the Emperor to beg forgiveness, saying that you were powerless and could not capture the culprits, and beg him to relieve you of your position as Commander General as a warning to others.” Mei Changsu smiled as he leaned closer. “So what about it, Commander General, can you bear to give up this position?”

Meng Zhi laughed loudly. “Giving up power and position has never been a difficulty of mine. But once I have returned to being a civilian, what power will I have to help you?”

“As long as you yourself are alright, that will be a help to me.” Mei Changsu picked up a pair of silver scissors lying on the table and trimmed the fraying candlewick as he said slowly, “I am almost certain that Xie Yu was behind the murder of the internal guards.....in the whole capital, there is no one else with the motive

and capacity.”

“Then isn’t the case.....”

“Knowing that it was Xie Yu does not solve the case.” Mei Changsu’s expression was peaceful. “Especially you, you’ve just aroused the Emperor’s suspicions over your relationship with Prince Yu, if you accuse Xie Yu now without proof or evidence, wouldn’t it seem even more as if you were participating in the fight for the crown?”

“Then find evidence!”

“What kind of a crime is the assassination of imperial messengers? What kind of a person is Xie Yu? If he commits a crime like this, would he leave behind the slightest shred of evidence?”

A smile as cold as ice drifted across the edge of Mei Changsu’s mouth. “Putting aside the fact that you cannot find evidence, even if you did find something, this case cannot be solved by you.”

Meng Zhi was a bit confused, and burst out, “Why?”

“The current Emperor has ascended the throne for so many years, I will not comment on other aspects, but no matter what, he is not a dispassionate person. This case infringes on the dignity and face of the royal family, so even if he still had complete faith in you, he still would not hand this case only to the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, who has limited experience in criminal investigations. Therefore.....the Xuanjing Bureau will certainly receive the imperial edict to investigate this case simultaneously, it is only that they will conduct their own investigation, and will not work with you.”

“That’s true,” Meng Zhi nodded absently. “This has always been a case the Xuanjing Bureau should be involved in.”

“Correct, and so if this was always a case that would likely bring in the Xuanjing Bureau, then when Xie Yu committed this crime,

he had to first consider how to handle those conducting the investigation, which is not an amateur like you, but the Xuanjing officers. In other words, even if he could not guarantee that he himself would not be identified as a suspect by the Xuanjing officers, at the very least, he was sure that no evidence would be found. And if there is no evidence, the Xuanjing Bureau would not dare to report to the Emperor that they have solved the crime.” Mei Changsu knocked his fingertips against the table lightly, a faint smile on his face. “Meng dage, if a case that even the Xuanjing Bureau cannot solve is solved by you, the Emperor would not only be astonished, he would be terrified.”

“Ah.....” Meng Zhi stared at him blankly for a long moment before regaining his composure. “Xiao Shu, how can you so clearly see so many different aspects that I’ve never even thought about?”

“If you are to serve this kind of lord, you must learn to think thoroughly, or it will be you who comes to grief.” Mei Changsu lowered his head, a faint look of pain passing over his face. “He has already become suspicious towards you, if you suddenly appear so capable and seem to vault easily over every difficulty, he will become more and more certain that he has misjudged you in the past, and that he has not succeeded in completely controlling you, and you will only end up bringing countless misfortunes upon yourself. So, the only option left is to appear weak, to let him see you in a precarious position, helpless in the face of hardship and unable to defend against any of the accusations piling upon your head, so that you seem to be completely dependent on his mercy. This way, he will believe that he is able to hold you in his grasp, and does not need to worry that you will become a danger to him.”

Meng Zhi’s face was taut with fury, but there was a shred of grief in his expression too, as he said through gritted teeth, “What you say makes sense, but how can the relationship between a lord and his servant amount to something like this? So long as I serve with a heart of zeal and loyalty, what can his suspicions, even suspicions

greater than these, ever do to harm me?”

“Have you not seen how they end up, those with hearts of zeal and loyalty?” Mei Changsu had not thought that Meng Zhi would say something like this now, and couldn’t help becoming a little angry. “If you do not value your own life, can you at least value sister-in-law’s tears? Naive words like these may be spoken, but if you really act them out, then it will not be sacrifice, only stupidity!”

“I.....” Meng Zhi lowered his head regretfully. “I know you are saying this for my good, but for some reason, it is still difficult to bear in my heart....”

Mei Changsu looked at him steadily, his face like snow, and felt a sharp pain in his chest followed by a sense of nausea, and he couldn’t help raising his sleeve to his mouth and coughing hard. Meng Zhi rushed over and patted his back, sending in some of his vital energy. He thought about the words he had just spoken, realizing that they had indeed been inappropriate, and a wordless guilt overwhelmed him. He opened his mouth to explain, but was afraid of worsening the situation and causing him even more grief, and he was struggling to decide when Fei Liu suddenly flew into the room and gripped Mei Changsu by the arm, turning a furious glare onto Meng Zhi.

After coughing for a long while, Mei Changsu gradually caught his breath, and first patted Fei Liu’s hand comfortingly, and then gave a faint smile and said quietly, “Forgive me, the smoke of the lamp is strong, and made me choke....”

“Xiao Shu.....”

“Alright, Meng dage, I know this causes you grief, but with things the way they are now, I fear you will have to listen to me anyway....”

“I understand,” Meng Zhi’s heart grew hot as he gripped his hand. “Xiao Shu, I will do whatever you say. I will not investigate

anything this month, and when the time is up, I will go to the Emperor and beg for forgiveness.”

“Not quite,” Mei Changsu laughed faintly. “This month, you should investigate whatever you are supposed to investigate, and appear as anxious as you should be when you are unable to uncover any evidence, it is only that your efforts will certainly be futile from the start. As for whether the Emperor will permit your resignation, although he has grown suspicious towards you, there is still foundation for trust. Even with the court full of civil and military officials alike, how can he find anyone more trustworthy than you to immediately fill the position of Commander General of the Imperial Guard? It is only unfortunate that someone will have to suffer for this.”

“Who?”

“Your vice commander.”

“Zhu Shouchun? He has worked for me for seven or eight years....”

“And that is why he will be removed. I think the Emperor’s most likely move will not be to relieve you of your position, but to choose a few people who have no connection with you entirely to be your assistants, and so balance the distribution of power.”

Meng Zhi laughed coldly. “I have a clear conscience, he may send in whoever he likes. But I must find a good place for my brothers who will be relieved of their positions.”

“I fear Xie Yu would not dare take them into the city guard. Take this opportunity to give them to Prince Jing, he will not mistreat your brothers.”

“Ai,” Meng Zhi let out a long sigh. “Although my heart is still a little unhappy, with you to handle matters for me, I am much more at ease. That’s everything taken care of, then.”

“We cannot let down our guard so quickly,” Mei Changsu shook

his head. "You will not be idle this month, and Xie Yu will certainly not either. He has raised such a fuss, he will not back down after just one attack. So your Imperial Guard must guard the palace very carefully, there cannot be another incident to deteriorate the situation."

"I am confident that we will be able to secure the palace like an iron bucket. But Xie Yu has Zhuo Dingfeng, and ordinary soldiers will find it difficult to defend against martial arts experts."

"Leave this to me. Zhuo Dingfeng can only act in the open, so it is not difficult to handle him. I have my ways to monitor him, his son, and the experts he has befriended. If they are clever and realize that they are being watched, then they will not dare to act in circumstances where they cannot be sure they will be able to escape. If they are a bit slow and do not realize they are under surveillance, then they will fall neatly into my hands, and as soon as they make a move, I will have my evidence, and then I can deliver them to Xia Dong, and see whether she will let Xie Yu off so lightly this time around." A frosty haughtiness seemed to drift over Mei Changsu. "Xie Yu only had the advantage in striking first on New Year's Eve, otherwise, if we debate jianghu skill alone, would Jiangzuo Alliance lose to Tianquan Manor?"

"Exactly," Meng Zhi couldn't help smiling. "If Zhuo Dingfeng really believes your power does not extend across fourteen provinces of jianghu, then it is truly his loss."

Mei Changsu sighed a little regretfully. "Whether for fame, for fortune, or for friendship, Zhuo Dingfeng has already been pulled by Xie Yu onto the same boat. In the end, he is still a renowned hero of jianghu, and cannot be underestimated. It is only that the turmoil of the capital is not a battlefield with which he is familiar, and now that their children have been joined in marriage, they cannot be but one family, so if he wishes to escape from this intact in the future, it will not be so easy."

Meng Zhi answered with a hint of coldness in his voice, "In the

end, this was his own choice, so whatever the result, he can only swallow it himself. But as for Xiao Jingrui, this young man.....I have always admired his warmth and generosity, it is too bad he will be brought to grief by his fathers in the future.”

On hearing these words, Mei Changsu’s brow knitted in distress, and he turned away to stare at the light of the lamp, murmuring dazedly, “As for Jingrui.....it will be more than a pity.....”

Chapter 71: A Cloudful of Visitors

Today, Prince Yu came early to the Su manor, and asked Mei Changsu why he had come to the imperial Yu residence the day before. Since it was all now water under the bridge, Mei Changsu only answered that he had gone to pay his new year's greetings, and did not mention any other reason, waiting until Prince Yu himself brought up the murder case before lightly and casually reminding him not to intercede for Meng Zhi again.

Because he had returned very late from Meng manor the previous night, had been unable to fall asleep for a long time after he had gone to bed, and had also gotten up early today to receive his guest, Mei Changsu was very tired and was finding it difficult to sustain his attention. Prince Yu saw that he was looking poorly and so did not stay long, only chatting for an hour before rising to take his leave.

Since it was still early, although he had invited Yan Yujin to bring the Xie brothers over today, Mei Changsu figured they would probably not arrive until the afternoon, and so he left some instructions for Li Gang and then returned to his room to sleep.

Li Gang had been worried ever since Mei Changsu had gotten up that morning looking so unwell, and with this nap, he immediately panicked and forbade anyone from making noise anywhere near the room, and even Fei Liu was coaxed and tricked into playing in the outer courtyard.

So Mei Changsu did not know that, on this morning, a girl with her face covered in a light gauze veil came quietly to the side door asking to see him.

“My apologies, Miss Gong Yu, but the Chief is asleep and cannot be disturbed at the moment.” Li Gang was finding it difficult to stop her. “Do you have something important to report?”

“I.....wanted to come to bring the Chief my new year's greetings

in person.....”

“If it is only this, then I fear it is not possible.....you know as well as I that the Chief has always been in poor health, and the physician says he needs his rest. He left instructions that he had matters to deal with this afternoon, and asked us to wake him at noon. So you see, he only has these few hours to sleep, and it would really not be proper to disturb him only for new year’s greetings from one of our own.....how about waiting in the outer courtyard and going in to see the Chief after he wakes up?”

Beneath the thin veil, only the girl’s snow-white skin and bright eyes were visible, and her expression could not be seen. After a few moments of silence, a light sigh sounded. “Never mind, I did not tell Mister Shisan I was coming here, so I cannot wait long. Please, Li dage, do not tell the Chief that I came....”

“Ah?” Li Gang was a bit confused. “Didn’t Miss come to see the Chief?”

“I thought, if I could only see the Chief, then I wouldn’t mind being scolded by him, but now that I cannot see him, then why anger him for no reason? The Chief ordered us before not to come to this place without his permission....”

Li Gang still didn’t quite understand, but he at least knew that a young girl’s heart was difficult to fathom so he did not question her any further, only smiling and escorting her out.

Gong Yu had just left when another round of guests appeared from different manors bringing new year’s greetings. Li Gang hurried over to receive them, and as he busied himself over the daily affairs of the manor, Gong Yu’s visit was quickly put aside.

After the noon hour, Mei Changsu woke without being called and got up to clean his face and arrange his hair, then changed into a brightly-coloured robe, and his whole person appeared so much healthier that when Physician Yan came over for a look, he seemed reasonably satisfied. Of course, he did not know that Mei Changsu

had snuck out the previous night, or he would certainly have spent another hour scolding him.

The young friends he had invited indeed arrived in the afternoon, and aside from the three familiar faces, they had an eighteen or nineteen-year-old young man with them, who could only be the third young master of the Xie family, Xie Xu.

Perhaps it was because he had been spoiled as the youngest son, or because his youth made him arrogant, or because he had not traveled the jianghu like his oldest brother or been involved in matters of the court like his second brother, but whatever the reason, the third son of the Xie family appeared even more like the typical child of a rich and powerful noble family. He was conceited and contemptuous, looking down on everyone around him, and the look in his eyes betrayed his impatience at being dragged to see this title-less, sickly commoner by his older brothers, as if he wanted to say, "If there is anything impressive about you, show it to me now, or I will consider you a fraudulent show-off with nothing but an undeserved reputation and unwarranted fame."

But Mei Changsu seemed uninterested in appeasing this young noble, and aside from the initial courteous greetings, he did not pay much mind to Xie Xu, spending most of his time talking warmly and affectionately to Xiao Jingrui instead.

"There are so many people in your Xie and Zhuo families, it must have been very lively on New Year's Eve."

"It was lively indeed, but the rituals also become a headache to follow with so many people, and it was almost midnight by the time we finished going around paying each other our New Year's greetings according to age and seniority." Xiao Jingrui saw that Mei Changsu was in a good mood, and he was delighted in turn, and so began telling him about the new year celebrations at his home. Although he was not as naturally talkative as Yan Yujin, he was actually quite an eloquent speaker, and as he sketched out the vivid scene, it was almost as if his audience were experiencing the

events as he spoke.

“What’s there to talk about? What noble household does not celebrate the new year according to these kinds of rituals?” Xie Xu was feeling indignant because he had been ignored, and so now broke in to say mockingly, “Has Mister Su never celebrated the new year like this before?”

“Third Brother!” Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi reprimanded in unison.

“Oh, sorry,” Xie Xu immediately assumed an abashed expression. “I forgot, Mister Su comes from a different background, and so passes the New Year carefree and leisurely, unlike us, constrained by all these rules we have to follow....”

Xiao Jingru’s face darkened and he looked as if he was about to explode, but Mei Changsu raised a hand lightly to stop him, saying blandly, “Extravagant households indeed have many rules and rituals to follow for the new year, it must be tough for the Third Young Master to have to learn them all at such a young age.” He then changed the subject, casually asking Yan Yujin when he would be taking Fei Liu out to play.

Since Mei Changsu had been so magnanimous and generous, Xiao Jingrui couldn’t very well discipline his little brother while they were guests at someone else’s home, and seeing that Xie Bi had already forcefully pulled Xie Xu over to sit by him, he did not say anything more.

“Brother Su really trusts me to take Fei Liu out?” Yan Yujin grinned. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll bring a Fei Liu out with me, and return with a feng liu?”

Xie Bi laughed at this. “Would you only return with a feng liu? I’d be impressed if you didn’t return with a xia liu.”

“Bullying me again I see, if you’re so skeptical, come with me to Miaoyin House, and we’ll see who Miss Gong Yu pays more attention to.” Yan Yujin waggled his eyebrows. “But you’re already

taken, so I guess you'll have to exercise a little restraint."

"What, does Xie Bi have a happy announcement to make?" Mei Changsu picked up the cue, smiling at Yan Yujin.

"Don't listen to Yujin's nonsense.....there's still half a year until....." Xie Bi flushed.

"And whose family does the lovely lady belong to?"

Xiao Jingrui thought he really did not know, and said hurriedly, "She's the daughter of my Zhuo dad, so she caught the eye of Second Brother a long time ago."

"Dage!"

Mei Changsu smiled warmly. "Since there is feeling between the two of you, it will grow into loving affection after marriage. But Jingrui, you are the older brother, how could you let Xie Bi climb ahead of you?"

"I....." Xiao Jingrui lowered his head, his cheeks growing a little pale. "I'm not in a rush...."

"Don't mind him, his standards are too high." Yan Yujin lightly changed the subject. "Now that Brother Su has recovered, why don't we find a day to go to Spiral Market Street? Even without considering all the other houses, the music of Miaoyin House is truly out of this world, and Brother Su is such an expert, you must come and listen."

Mei Changsu smiled and was about to answer when Li Gang appeared outside the door with a stack of cards in his hand. "Chief, these are the greetings card that have just arrived by mail, will you look at them now?"

"Put them over there," Mei Changsu glanced at a bookshelf at the side of the room. "I'll answer them later."

Li Gang came in respectfully, arranged the cards carefully on the shelf and then retreated out of the room.

Yan Yujin was sitting nearest the bookshelf and so he looked over curiously, and when he saw the signature on the pale envelope at the top of the pile, his eyes widened. “That...that...that is a greeting card handwritten by Mister Moshan....”

“Oh, is it?” Mei Changsu glanced over. “It’s arrived so soon? I thought, since I’m in the capital this year, it would not arrive until the fifth day of the new year at least.”

“Mister Moshan sends you a greeting card every year?” Yan Yujin moved over for a closer look. “He signed the card, ‘Elder Brother Moshan’, he addresses you as his equal....”

“Brother Moshan treats me so kindly, it would be impolite of me to refuse the honour. In truth, we simply exchange a few letters every year, and it is only a correspondence between gentlemen, nothing more.”

“How many people in this world could correspond with Mister Moshan?” Yan Yujin let out a sigh and gave Xie Xu, who was sitting to one side looking as stunned as a wooden chicken, a meaningful look. “And Mister Moshan’s Songshan Academy only accepts the most outstanding and talented young men.....that’s right, Xie Xu, aren’t you studying at Songshan Academy? It looks like you’re Brother Su’s junior by rank then....”

Mei Changsu looked at Xie Xu’s reddening face, and thinking that he was still young and not wanting to make things difficult for him, he only said lightly, “There is no relation between us, why argue over rank?” He did not look at Xie Xu again, but turned to smile warmly at Xiao Jingrui, saying, “I haven’t seen Jingrui’s sword dance in such a long time, since we happen to have some time today, care to show Brother how you’ve improved?”

Although Xiao Jingrui had been furious over Xie Xu’s rudeness, he couldn’t bear to see his younger brother embarrassed now, and hearing Mei Changsu’s words, he knew he was lightening the atmosphere on purpose, so he got up hurriedly and cupped his

hands with a grin, saying, “It has truly been a long time since I benefited from Brother Su’s instruction, shall we go out to the courtyard?”

Chapter 72: Birthday

The southern side of the courtyard of Mei Changsu's manor was the manor's main gate, and the other three sides were fenced in by large, spacious houses, leaving a square of green-bricked empty space at its center. This plain and unadorned design without even a hint of greenery was indeed at odds with Mei Changsu's gracious, scholarly air, and he kept talking about renovating, but as it was still the middle of winter, there was no way to begin construction, and so the manor was kept in its original appearance for now, and although there was not much scenery to boast of, it made a naturally perfect ground for swords training.

Since there was to be a sword dance, naturally there must be a sword. But the First Young Master Xiao was not a traditional jianghu man, and he was not about to bring a sword with him while he went around paying new year's visits, so Mei Changsu ordered Li Gang to find one at random for him in the manor .

Soon, this casually-found sword was placed into the hand of the sword-dancer. The sword was gracefully swept from its shark-skin sheath and balanced delicately in his hand. It felt a little heavy at first, but as he gently plucked the sword to test its edge, it seemed to move lightly in his grasp, and when he inspected the blade more closely, he saw its watery green luster and finely honed edge and recognized it for the excellent weapon it was, it was only a pity that it had no master.

“Jingrui, you think you look so cool standing there staring straight ahead with your sword held out like that, don't you?” Yan Yujin scolded laughingly. “You've held that position for so long without moving, we're falling asleep over here.”

Xiao Jingrui laughed and returned the blade to its sheath, his left hand undoing his belt as he spun quickly, his clothes flying, and in the next moment, he had taken off his long outer gown and handed it to Li Gang, who was standing off to the side, revealing a brand

new silver-embroidered under-robe. He had always been a handsome young man, and this kind of narrow-sleeved, tight-fitting attire naturally showed off his pleasing figure, so even before he could pick up the sword again, Yan Yujin was already clapping his hands, cheering, “Wonderful! Wonderful! Come with me to Spiral Market Street looking just like that, and we’ll see whether you ever make it back out again!”

“Looks like someone’s getting jealous....” Xie Bi deadpanned, and Mei Changsu felt the corner of his lips twitch in a suppressed smile. Sunlight flashed off metal in the courtyard as the sword began slicing through the air.

The style of swordsmanship Xiao Jingrui practiced was naturally the Tianquan method passed down in Tianquan Manor. At the peak of the Zhuo clan’s glory, they had not only dominated the martial arts world in the south, they had even produced two first-ranked military generals, and their renown and power were second to none. Later, although they retired from the court, they kept their place in the jianghu, and everyone knew the name of the current Chief, Zhuo Dingfeng, who had made the Langya Lists of Martial Arts Experts for the past ten years in a row. He was currently ranked fourth on the list, and in Da Liang, he was second only to Meng Zhi.

Although Xiao Jingrui would certainly not be Tianquan Manor’s successor, firstly because of his personal history and secondly because he was not the eldest son, Zhuo Dingfeng had never held back because of this in teaching him swordsmanship. So with the meticulous guidance of such a great master, and with Jingrui’s own natural talent, he had by now achieved the full potential of this set of skills, and though perhaps he could be a little more adaptable when he was truly fighting against an opponent, it was difficult to find any obvious faults in his regular training dances.

It was a festive day, so Mei Changsu had asked Xiao Jingrui to show off his skills mainly to lighten the atmosphere, and did not

really intend to discuss swordsmanship with him, and so he only bestowed a few words of praise, commending him for not neglecting his training and admiring how much he had improved. Among the other spectators, Yan Yujin was less experienced, Xie Bi knew nothing about martial arts, and although Xie Xu received both scholarly and military training, like most sons of noble houses, he mainly practiced archery and riding, and so the three could only stand in admiration, unable to offer any substantial comments. Instead, it was Fei Liu, sitting on a corner of the roof, who studied the display carefully from beginning to end, his fingers moving restlessly as he dissected each move.

When the sword dance ended, Aunt Ji brought out a plate of freshly-cooked sesame dumplings and everyone returned to the warm room, laughing and talking as they ate. Xie Xu, bored, only ate a few before finding an excuse to leave. Everyone saw that he was not quite fitting in and so did not make him stay, but Xiao Jingrui still got up and went to the door, instructing their servants to carefully escort him home before letting him go.

“Jingrui is such a good older brother, I suppose your older Zhuo brother must also be a prudent and cautious man. I wonder what his swordsmanship is like?” Mei Changsu prodded the white sesame dumpling in his bowl with a long spoon, inhaling its sweet fragrance as he spoke casually.

“Qingyao dage’s martial arts are much better than mine,” Xiao Jingrui said admiringly. “Like in that move, ‘the bird flies out of the forest’, I can only strike seven blows with my sword, but he can strike nine.”

“You are younger, so it is no surprise that you lag a little behind. But your Zhuo dage’s name is already quite well-known in jianghu, I heard it often when I was in Lang province.” Mei Changsu looked as if he had suddenly thought of something, and asked, “What do you usually call him? Do you call him dage, or brother-in-law?”

“I hear him call him dage,” Yan Yujin laughed. “But he is both

your dage and your brother-in-law, someone outside the family would never understand what's going on."

"Jingrui's story is a household tale by now, how could there be anyone who doesn't know it?" Mei Changsu blew on his sesame dumpling and slowly took a bite, the white steam rising before him, his expression a little confused. ".....Will they return to Fenzuo after the first month of the New Year passes?"

"There's no rush, Fenzuo is less than ten days' travel from the capital, so they usually stay until the middle of April before leaving. But this year, only my Zhuo dad is going back, Mum and Qingyao dage are staying to keep Qi mei company....." As Xiao Jingrui spoke, a happy smile appeared on his face. "My Qi mei is having a baby, she's due to give birth in May, so I will be a shushu.....ng.....and also a jiujiu....."

"Congratulations," Mei Changsu smiled at the two brothers of the Xie family. "Her Highness the Grand Princess must be worried about the young lady, to have her stay with her maiden family to give birth."

"That's right. My Zhuo dad is a jianghu man, and my Xie dad is a military man, so they don't care about those customs about not allowing girls to give birth in their maiden homes. Besides, girls are always most comfortable with their own mothers by their sides, and my Zhuo mother will stay too, so Qi mei will be very well taken care of."

"Jingrui," Yan Yujin widened his eyes. "Why don't you tell Brother Su why your Zhuo parents always stay until the middle of April before leaving?"

"They, they want to, to spend more time together," Xiao Jingrui's cheeks were red, and he glared at Yan Yujin. "I think it's great for our two families to live together for a little while."

Mei Changsu was an intelligent person, and there was laughter in his eyes as he said, "Could it be that there is some important event

that takes place in April?”

“Have a guess, Brother Su,” Xie Bi joined in the teasing.

“Jingrui’s birthday?” Mei Changsu’s brow furrowed lightly. “So which day in the middle of April is it then, hm?”

“April twelfth,” Yan Yujin beat the others to the answer. “But that was too easy, look at Jingrui’s expression, it’s obviously saying to Brother Su, ‘That date has something to do with me! Something to do with me!’”

“Shut up!” Xiao Jingrui laughed as he aimed a kick at him. “When have you ever seen an expression speak?”

“Hunh, it’s not just expressions, sometimes eyebrows, the corner of mouths, fingers, and even hair can speak, and even if you don’t smile or scowl, even if you don’t look at me, I can still tell what they are saying.”

“Are you talking about your precious beauties?” Xiao Jingrui’s lip twitched. “Don’t get too cocky, one of these days, someone will come along who can keep you under her thumb, and then I’ll come to watch the show.”

“Don’t hold your breath.” Yan Yujin purposefully adopted a lofty air. “We’ll see who’s laughing at whom.”

Mei Changsu watched quietly as the two bantered, and though it was a familiar scene, a strange sadness arose in his heart. The bowl of hot dumplings in his hand had already grown cool, though he had only eaten two.

“Brother Su, are you feeling unwell?” Xie Bi leaned over in concern. “Or are you tired?”

“It’s nothing, I’m always like this in the winter.” Mei Changsu smiled and placed his bowl on the table, turning his warm gaze onto Xiao Jingrui. “How do you usually celebrate your birthday?”

“Oh, I’m of the younger generation, so it’s not worth much

celebration....” Xiao Jingrui had just begun when Xie Bi cut him off.

“Oh, come on, if your birthday isn’t considered a celebration, then Xie Xu and I might as well just cry our way through our birthdays!”

“That’s right, Jingrui’s birthday is always a bigger deal than those of the other Xie brothers. It can’t be helped, he has two sets of parents, so everything has to be doubled.” Yan Yujin was clearly familiar with the situation. “Besides the huge pile of gifts, there’s always a banquet every year, with all the friends he wants to invite, and after dinner, when the elders have retired, we can go as crazy as we like. It’s the only day of the year you can really do whatever you want, isn’t it?”

“In that case, Jingrui’s birthday must be the happiest day of the year.” Mei Changsu looked at Xiao Jingrui’s expression and knew that Yan Yujin had spoken truly. And this year he would be turning twenty-five, an important age, and so the celebration could only be even more lively.

“Of course I’m happy to spend time with my friends, doing whatever we like,” Xiao Jingrui looked at Mei Changsu, his face sobering slightly. “If Brother Su could come too this year, that would be nice....”

“Are you crazy?” Yan Yujin smacked his shoulder. “Brother Su will certainly be in the city in April, so of course he must come. You tried to invite him to your home for New Year’s Eve but you’re not going to invite him for your own birthday?”

Xiao Jingrui was about to reply, but then hesitated, his gaze faltering. Although Yan Yujin was intelligent, there were some things he did not know. When he had invited Mei Changsu to his manor for New Year’s Eve, aside from the consideration of the appropriateness of the time and situation, he had neglected another important aspect, which were the respective positions Su

Zhe and the Xie manor had taken in the fight for the throne. When he remembered the events that had taken place in Snow Cottage on Mei Changsu's last night at their residence, he could not be sure whether this Brother Su whom he respected so deeply would even consent to pass through the gates of the Xie manor again.

But in contrast to Xiao Jingrui's complicated emotions, Mei Changsu appeared rather at ease as he said, still smiling, "I find Jingrui's words strange as well.....Jingrui, are you really not going to invite me?"

Xiao Jingrui was stunned for a moment before he asked doubtfully, "Brother Su would consent to come?"

"We are friends, and are living in the same city, what reason would I have not to come? It's only that I'm a little more advanced in my years, and can't join in when it gets too exciting, so don't mind me if I seem a little like a wet blanket, that's all."

Xiao Jingrui was delighted, and said hurriedly, "It's a deal, I will definitely be waiting to receive Brother Su."

"Hmph, you've reaped a profit this time, Brother Su definitely won't come empty-handed, and he'll have something good for you for sure." Yan Yujin kicked lightly at his friend, and then turned to say, "Brother Su, my birthday is on the seventh of July, don't forget!"

Mei Changsu couldn't help laughing, and then began coughing into his sleeve. "Alright.....I will remember....."

"With such a coincidental birthday, Brother Su couldn't forget even if he wanted to," Xie Bi teased. "If you were born just a few days later, on the fifteenth of July, that would be even better."

"Boys born on the seventh of July are known for valuing friendship and affection," Mei Changsu defended Yan Yujin. "I think Yujin lives up to this description."

"Ng," Xie Bi nodded, his expression solemn. "He is certainly

affectionate towards beautiful ladies....”

“I’m not listening,” Yan Yujin stuck his tongue out in his direction and then scooted over to Mei Changsu, saying quietly in his ear, “Brother Su, when you’ve thought of what you’re going to give Jingrui, you have to tell me first, so we don’t give him the same present.”

Although he spoke in a low voice, it was not low enough to escape the hearing of those beside them, and Xiao Jingrui pushed him, scolding laughingly, “You think Brother Su is like you, always coming up with weird things as gifts? Anyway, it’s the thought that counts, I’ll be happy with anything you give me.”

“The present is indeed not the most important thing..... regardless, I have a feeling that, this year, Jingrui will truly have a birthday he will never forget....”

Mei Changsu spoke warmly and with a light smile on his face, and the three young men laughed with him, unaware of the conflicting emotions in his hooded gaze, which flitted between sympathy, regret, and grim determination.

“Chief,” Li Gang appeared again at the door of the room. “Prince Yu sent people over with an invitation to a banquet at his manor on the fifth, the messengers are waiting for a reply, I apologize for the interruption....”

The red invitation card was delivered to the table, and the joyful atmosphere in the room immediately dissipated. Yan Yujin bit his lip, Xiao Jingrui lowered his eyes, and Xie Bi’s face paled.

It seemed their delicate friendship could never escape the looming shadow of reality for long.

“Send a reply to Prince Yu saying that the banquet on the fifth is a gathering of noble guests, and as I have other engagements on that day, I will not disrupt them with my presence.” Mei Changsu’s gaze passed lightly over the three young men as he

answered indifferently.

Chapter 73: Memorial

Outside the city of Jinling, the western, southern, and northern borders were largely flat plains with the occasional rolling hill, but the eastern side was covered by a mountain range, which, although not very tall, extended well into the distance.

Gushan was the mountain closest to the capital, and from the eastern Dongyang gates of the capital, it was less than an hour's ride on a fast horse to its foot. In the fall, the mountain came alive with red and gold leaves, but as it was now deep winter, the trees stood in the snow with their barren trunks, lending a bleak and desolate atmosphere to the scenery surrounding the winding mountain road. Beyond a flight of stairs in a quiet corner of the mountain's peak, there was a simple pavilion, lined by a fence of twisting vines. About a hundred steps south of the pavilion, there was a gentle slope, slanting towards a cliff, and on the slope, there was a grave built out of stone. Before the grave sat two baskets of fresh fruits and three lit sticks of incense, the spark of their flames shining like stars as thin lines of smoke spiraled up into the sky.

This year, the new year had arrived late, and so the weather was already warming a little. But on the peak of Gushan, the mountain winds were strong, and the cold seemed to pierce into one's very bones.

Xia Dong stood silently before the grave, dressed in a long robe of raw silk and plain cotton, the black skirt of her robe fluttering in the wind. The long hair that normally rested on her shoulders was piled high on her head, the streak of white still clearly visible, which, along with the slight wrinkles around the corners of her eyes, betrayed the passing of her youth.

Paper ash filled the air. The fragrance of the incense was dissipating, and the wine that had been poured into the earth had long since sunk deep into the dirt. Only the name on the grave stone still gleamed a blinding red, although it had already been

traced a thousand times by those pale fingers.

She had been standing there since the sky slowly lit at dawn, burning paper and talking softly, and now the sunlight penetrated through the branches of the trees above onto her head, its brightness almost dizzying. The mist in the valleys below had disappeared, and the outline of the city beyond was gradually becoming visible, its silhouette emerging slowly from the misty landscape.

“Nie Feng, another year has passed....”

Ever since he had departed, each day felt as long as three seasons. Nevertheless, a year had slowly gone by.

As she stood before his grave, letting him watch as, year by year, she succumbed a little more to the passing of time and age, she wondered whose tears burned more fiercely, and whose heart ached more keenly – the person lying within the grave, or the one standing without?

Perhaps, when you can cry no longer, tears turn into blood, and when you can feel no more, pain turns into anesthesia.

She let out a long breath. Seeing him again had become her most luxurious wish on this earth.

Xia Dong's finger traced the familiar lines once more, her ice-cold fingertips brushing against the coarse surface of the stone, and with every stroke, she felt a spasm in her chest, as if her heart was throbbing.

The wind whistled by her ear, but beneath the sound, she heard faint voices drifting over from the direction of the mountain road.

Xia Dong's long thin brows furrowed, a frown appearing over her face.

Few people ventured onto Gushan in the winter as it was, and this was an especially remote part of the mountain, and further more, it was still only the fifth day of the new year. In all the years

she had come to burn her sacrifices, this was the first time she had been disturbed.

“Chief, there is only a little path in that direction, the main peak is this way, look, you can already see it....”

“Never mind, I want to walk on the little paths, the trees are thicker here, and the shadows are dancing in the sunlight, isn’t it more interesting?”

“Yes.....be careful, there is snow on the ground, it is easy to slip and fall.”

“With you holding on to me like this, even if I slip, I won’t be able to fall.....”

The light voices drifted over clearly in the quiet. Xia Dong took a deep breath and turned slowly, her face expressionless.

“Officer Xia....” The newcomer looked surprised. “What a coincidence....”

“Mister Su must be in good spirits to have come climbing a mountain in the dead of winter.” Xia Dong’s voice was peaceful as she spoke. “But I seem to remember there was a banquet today....”

“It was because I wanted to avoid the excitement that I came out here to hide from the city. If I stayed in my manor, I wouldn’t be able to turn down the invitations,” Mei Changsu said bluntly, not bothering to hide his intentions. “Besides, I have recently recovered from illness, and my physician advised me to walk in the mountains to regain my strength slowly, as a form of treatment. Gushan is closest to the city, so I decided to come here. Have I disturbed you?”

“Gushan does not belong to me, of course anyone can come,” Xia Dong said coolly. “This is my husband’s grave, and people seldom wander to these parts, so it is only a little unexpected.”

“This is where General Nie’s bones are buried, then?” Mei Changsu took a step forward. His voice was steady, but his long

lashes lowered, hiding the expression in his eyes. "He was truly a glorious general of his generation, and I have always admired his might and honour. Since fortune has brought me here today, would you allow me to make an offering, to show my respect?"

Xia Dong was taken aback, but reflected that, as he had arrived here now, and with the friendship they had developed talking in the snow that day, it would be lacking in manners for him not to pay his respects at the grave of her departed husband. As for his reverent words, it was not worth wondering whether they were genuine or not, so she nodded and said, "I am indebted to Mister's kindness, please go ahead."

Mei Changsu nodded to her, then walked slowly to the grave and knelt. He scattered herbs of incense onto the ground, then clasped his hands and bowed deeply three times. He turned his face slightly and asked in a low voice, "Li Gang, I remember you carry a flask of wine by your side?"

"Yes."

"Lend it to me."

"Yes." Li Gang reverently removed the silver flask from his waist belt and bowed as he held it out.

Mei Changsu took the silver flask and removed the stopper. Then, holding it in both hands, he cried out in a clear voice, "The general of a hundred battles has fallen in defeat. At the river, he turns his head towards his kingdom, a thousand miles away, and bids his old friend farewell. The water flows desolate, the wind blows cold, as the white-shrouded figures line the shore. The song of mourning for the warrior hero will never come to an end. If songbirds knew of such grief and sorrow, they would weep rivers of crimson blood. Who is left to drink with me now under the radiant moon?The general's heroic spirit is here, and if his soul is willing to receive my own, please accept this wine!"

As he spoke, he poured wine onto the ground, then lifted his head

and swallowed a large mouthful. He coughed once lightly and suppressed the rest of the coughs fiercely as he wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. His gaze trembled a little as an uncontrollable surge of grief welled up in his chest, and he let out a light sigh in spite of himself.

Xia Dong was standing behind him, and though she could not see the expression of the person kneeling before the grave, she was moved by his sincerity and lost her composure for a moment, turning to lean against a nearby tree, her tears turning to ice as they fell.

“Mistress Nie, I am sorry for your loss.” A moment later, the gentle voice sounded by her ear, and the pain in her heart only deepened when she heard the change in the way he addressed her. But Xia Dong was not a dainty widow, and her pride would not allow her to show weakness before anyone she did not know well. She took a deep breath to control her erratic breathing, raised a hand to wipe at the tears on her face, and slowly calmed herself.

“I thank you for your great kindness. Please accept this bow in return.”

Mei Changsu bowed back, replying, “Sacrificial offerings are only to show the affections of the heart, I see Mistress Nie is dressed lightly and has no cloak, please allow me to escort you back down the mountain. General Nie’s soul in heaven would not want to see the mistress bring suffering to herself.”

Xia Dong had already finished her sacrifices and was preparing to leave anyway, and so did not refuse, and the two turned slowly and walked along the stone-paved path side by side. As they walked, they did not speak, and the only sound came from the wind howling through the falling snow.

As they neared the foot of the mountain, a straw tea-hut came into view with a horse tied in front of it, and Xia Dong asked, “Is mister returning to the city?”

Mei Changsu smiled. "It is early yet, still before noon, and too early to return. I hear there is a beautiful stone carving in an old town nearby, I wanted to take the opportunity to visit."

"The stone carving of Chixia town? It is indeed worth a visit." Xia Dong halted. "I have matters to deal with back in the capital, and so cannot accompany you."

"Officer Xia, please do not trouble yourself on my account." With the change in environment, Mei Changsu had automatically switched back to his former manner of address. "The case of the murdered guards is indeed a difficult one, and with the hard work ahead, you must take good care of your health."

Xia Dong's gaze swept over, sharp as a knife. "What does Mister Su mean by this?"

"What? Has the case not been given to the Xuanjing Bureau?"

Xia Dong's face grew colder. The case had been openly handed over to the manor of the Commander General of the Imperial Guard, and the imperial edict she had received had been sent in secret. But since she had already begun the investigation, it was only a matter of time until the news was out. But still, this Su Zhe had really found out a little too early.

"This is indeed a strange case, perhaps the Xuanjing Bureau will develop an interest in it later," Xia Dong replied, neither confirming nor denying his guess. She went on to ask, "But with such a clean murder, the assassins must have been jianghu experts, does Mister Su have any wise opinions on this?"

"The people of jianghu are so vast and varied that even Langya Hall must renew its lists every year, so how could I dare to comment? Besides, when has the Xuanjing Bureau ever bowed to Jiangzuo Alliance when it comes to knowledge of the masters of jianghu? Surely, Officer Xia knows better than I which martial arts experts are currently residing in the capital?"

Xia Dong's icy gaze turned away, her expression guarded. Xuanjing Officers served directly under the Emperor, and so naturally took no part in the fight for the throne, and were not allowed to harbour any bias. This Su Zhe could basically be counted as part of Prince Yu's camp by now, and so she had to be extremely careful if she was to continue this discussion with him.

The corner of Mei Changsu's lip curled in a smile, and he turned his gaze away slowly. He of course knew what Xia Dong was thinking. In the whole of the capital, aside from those who understood his true goals, everyone else had changed their attitudes towards him ever since they discovered that he had joined the fight for the throne, and even Yan Yujin and Xie Bi were no exception. The only one who had continued to treat him with the same earnest sincerity was Xiao Jingrui.

To everyone else, he was first Su Zhe, the qilin prodigy. But to Xiao Jingrui, he was only Mei Changsu, no more and no less.

No matter how much of his skill he displayed, no matter how great the ripples he raised in the capital, the friendship this young man had forged with him from the very beginning did not seem to change in the slightest.

Xiao Jingrui had looked upon this game of thrones all along with mild distress, though he had never forgotten his place. He did not think his father had chosen falsely, and also did not think Brother Su had picked the wrong side, he only grieved that the two could not stand together, and refused to give up his friendship with Mei Changsu because of this. He persisted in his frank and trusting attitude, and no matter what Mei Changsu asked, he always answered truthfully, never stopping to wonder about the meaning and intention behind Brother Su's question. This was not because he was not able to think in this way, but because he chose not to.

And in his invitation to his birthday banquet, Mei Changsu could clearly see the pure intentions of this young man: You are my friend, and as long as you are willing to come, I will guarantee your

safety.

Xiao Jingrui did not want to defy his father, but neither did he want to change Mei Changsu, he only wanted to make his own friends in his own way.

The clear wind blows under the clouded moon. It was only a pity that such a person had been born into the Xie manor.

Mei Changsu shook his head and sighed, forcing his thoughts to a halt. The wheels of fate were drawing near, and there was no point to any more thinking, because there was not a single person in this world who could reverse the fruits of time.

Xia Dong had not noticed his silence. Her gaze had fallen onto a winding path in the distance, as she let out a light, “Oh?”

Mei Changsu looked in the direction of her gaze and raised his eyebrows in surprise. About a hundred soldiers were gradually emerging from the depths of the dense forest, some with swords in their hands, some holding spears, and some carrying coils of rope on their back. From the snow and mud on their clothes and boots, it was evident that this group had been traversing through the forest for some time.

“Have you found it?” A tall, broad-shouldered officer emerged from the back of the group, his clear voice echoing in the quiet. From the insignia on his clothing, he looked to be a centurion.

“No.....”

“We saw nothing.....”

His subordinates looked disappointed.

“Didn’t the villagers say they saw it here before? Damn it! Missed it again!” The centurion cursed loudly, and as he lifted his head, his gaze fell onto the two in the distance, and he looked taken aback.

A bright smile spread across Mei Changsu’s face as he nodded in

greeting.

It was truly a small world when, whether by intention or coincidence, it was so easy to run into people you knew....

Chapter 74: Night of the Lantern Festival

“What, does Mister Su know this person? Xia Dong asked, looking at Mei Changsu’s expression.

“Not know, precisely, but we have met before. He is from the imperial Jing residence, and though I have only visited Prince Jing once, I have developed quite an impression of this dear brother.”

Xia Dong looked a bit surprised. “A centurion left an impression on Mister Su? He must have some remarkable traits, then?”

Mei Changsu nodded. “I wonder whether he has rectified those remarkable traits yet....”

At these strange words, Xia Dong raised her eyebrows and was about to inquire further, but the centurion had already strode over and, ignoring Mei Changsu, cupped his fists and bowed to Xia Dong, saying, “Your servant is Qi Meng, a centurion of Prince Jing’s army, may I ask if Officer Xia has just descended from the mountain?”

Xia Dong eyed him up and down as she answered, “Correct.”

“Did the two of you see a beast on the mountain?”

“A beast?” Xia Dong frowned. “This area is still within the jurisdiction of the capital, how could there be a beast?”

“There is, it is a beast covered in long fur that has been disturbing the villagers living on the mountain, which is why we received the order to come and capture it.”

Mei Changsu broke in to say, “I remember you have been working on this for some time already, have you still not been able to catch it?”

Qi Meng had originally been a military general of the fourth rank, but the title he had achieved by the blood and sweat of the battlefield had been reduced to centurion with a few cold words

from Mei Changsu, so it would be a lie to say he felt nothing towards this man, but at least three of the wise members of the imperial Jing residence had come to him the day he had been demoted, explaining and analyzing the whole event, and he had ended up blushing in shame, with no words left to justify his behaviour. Now, faced with Mei Changsu again, although there was still some discomfort in his heart and he was not willing to acknowledge him at first, since he had now spoken up, there was no reason for him to shame himself further by refusing to answer.

“These mountains are thick with forest, and the beast is very cunning, and we cannot stand guard here all day every day, we only come when the villagers report another sighting, but when we arrive, there is no sign of so much as the shadow of a beast, I don’t know if the villagers really saw anything....”

Mei Changsu looked around, thinking that these mountainous regions were indeed so dense with overgrown forest and covered such a tremendous area that trying to catch a beast in these parts was like trying to find a needle in an ocean, and so it was small wonder that their efforts had borne no fruit.

“Shouldn’t the Capital Magistrate Office be responsible for the villagers’ reports?” Xia Dong asked.

“The beast is so fierce that, though fifty people from the Capital Magistrate Office managed to surround it once, half of them ended up injured and they couldn’t capture it in the end, so Magistrate Gao had no choice but to come to my lord. My lord is the only one who will take up these kinds of lowly tasks that bring no glory or prestige.”

Xia Dong knew in her heart that this centurion spoke the truth, but she bore her own grudge towards Prince Jing and so she was not willing to comment, and only scoffed before turning to Mei Changsu to say, “I will return to the city now. Until we meet again.”

“Officer Xia, please take care.” Mei Changsu bent forward in a bow, watching as Xia Dong retrieved her horse and rode away, then turned slowly and gave Qi Meng a look.

“What now?” Qi Meng, frightened by the look, began frantically turning over the last few minutes in his mind, trying to figure out if he had said anything wrong.

Seeing his anxious appearance, Mei Changsu laughed in spite of himself. “Not bad, not bad, it has only been a few days since I saw you, and you have already learned self-reflection. It appears His Highness Prince Jing has really been working with his subordinates. There wasn’t anything improper about what you said to Xia Dong just now, but in the future, avoid saying such things if you can. His Highness Prince Jing needs to work more and speak less for the time being. He understands this, and as his subordinates, you should understand even better.”

Mei Changsu was only a commoner, not a strategist of Prince Jing’s household, and had previously had a bit of conflict with Qi Meng, so no matter how you looked at it, he should not have had any right to lecture him. But for some reason, his gentle scholarly air nonetheless carried its own kind of weight, and Qi Meng found himself nodding and saying, “I understand.”

By this time, Li Gang had ordered for the carriage to be brought over, and now he lowered the footstool and helped Mei Changsu up. Just as the carriage was about to move, Mei Changsu suddenly drew aside the curtain and leaned out to say to Qi Meng, “Find out from the villagers what this beast likes to eat, and build a trap for it.”

Before Qi Meng could respond, the curtain was lowered and the carriage slowly moved away.

When Mei Changsu returned to his manor, he was told that Prince Yu had actually come in person to extend his invitation, and, refusing to believe that he was really not at home, had

insisted on entering into the inner courtyard to look around, but in the end, because he had many noble guests arriving at his own manor, he could not stay long and so had finally hurried away, disgruntled.

When the tenth day of the new year had passed, lanterns began gradually appearing all over the city, in preparation for the Lantern Festival¹. The palace was no exception, and from the Empress' palace to the residence of the lowliest concubine, all the manors were decorated in their own unique fashion with the newest styles of lanterns, in the hopes of attracting the Emperor's attention and admiration on the night of the Lantern Festival.

But to some, the joyful atmosphere lingered only on the surface. Commander General of the Imperial Guard Meng Zhi was carefully investigating the case of the murdered guards, and at the same time, he greatly increased the protection of the palace, organizing additional shifts to maximize surveillance, and the fruits of his efforts were immediately felt, as they managed to stop two incidents in a row of arson by eunuchs in the palace. Unfortunately, the captured criminals committed suicide on the spot and no confession could be obtained, but from a study of their identities, they appeared to be eunuchs in charge of internal palace affairs, and not outsiders who had infiltrated the palace.

Because of these incidents, Empress Yan was publicly reprimanded by the Emperor, and had been forced to confess her guilt and beg for forgiveness. She understood that, as the Mistress of the Inner Palace, anything that went wrong in the palace was her responsibility, not that of the other consorts and concubines, and Consort Yue of course also escaped any hint of blame, so she could only be more careful in the future, and even more strictly monitor the comings and goings of everyone in the palace. The Empress was the daughter of the previous dynasty's Imperial Tutor, and at sixteen, she had been married to the current Emperor, who had been still a Prince then, as his official wife, and

then made Empress when he ascended to the throne, and she had managed the Six Palaces from that day forward.

Although their love had faded early on and the Emperor had turned his affection and favour elsewhere, and though she had never borne him a son, she had not worn the title of 'Mistress of the Inner Palace' all these years for show, and she had her own methods for managing the palace and everyone in it. And so, if Madam Yue had not been able to cause any great disturbance even when she had been receiving the heavy grace and favour of the Emperor back then, it was even less likely that anyone would manage to upset the peace of the palace now, if she tightened the reins of her control.

Compared to the turmoil in the palace, Mei Changsu appeared much more idle. After he had identified the few jianghu experts in the capital who had connections with Zhuo Dingfeng, this Chief of Jiangzuo Alliance quietly issued an urgent summons for an unknown swordsman, who arrived in the capital and proceeded to challenge each of the experts, one by one, according to the rules of jianghu, beating them so badly that they could not rise out of bed for half a month, neatly taking care of the problem. And after causing all this chaos, this nameless swordsman disappeared again as abruptly as he had appeared, leaving all kinds of wild rumours in his wake as everyone tried to guess where he had come from, and whether his name would be on the Langya Lists next year....

Stripped of his assistants, Zhuo Dingfeng was beginning to notice the eyes on him, but the surveillance was so skilled that, though he felt that he was being observed, he could find no proof. Under these circumstances, he could only refrain from acting for now, forced into a stalemate against his enemy. Xie Yu was a cautious man, and ensured that he never left any sign of his presence in any of his plots, and so, worried that the Xuanjing Officers had picked up his trail, he too did not dare order Zhuo Dingfeng to act, and as the stalemate dragged on, naturally the city was at peace.

It was traditional on New Year's Eve to stay up late to welcome the new year, and likewise, it was traditional to go out with friends and family to admire the lanterns on the night of the Lantern Festival. Although surveillance had been increased both inside and outside the palace, to Mei Changsu, who was running the show behind the scenes, this was no reason to miss out on any of the appropriate entertainment, especially since Fei Liu had put on a beautiful new robe and tied on a bright new hair tie before the sun had even set, waiting eagerly to go out to see the lanterns.

Because there was no curfew tonight, there was bound to be a huge crowd in the streets, and Li Gang was making very anxious preparations, arranging for guards to surround the group from every direction, and even specially instructing Fei Liu to hold on very tightly to Su gege's hand, and not to get lost.

"Won't get lost!" Fei Liu was feeling rather insulted by Uncle Li's order.

"You'll understand when you walk out the doors, people have been crushed to death in the crowds on Lantern Festival before, so you can imagine how easy it is to get lost, Fei Liu, you have to be careful."

"Won't get lost!" Fei insisted angrily.

Mei Changsu held back a smile as he patted the youth on the head, saying gently, "You misunderstood, Uncle Li means that Su gege will get lost, not that our Fei Liu will get lost."

Fei Liu was taken aback, and he thought about it seriously for a moment before suddenly gripping Mei Changsu's hand tightly and saying loudly, "Won't lose!"

Li Gang finally let out a sigh of relief and mopped at the sweat on his forehead.

When the clocks had sounded the ninth hour, the procession left the gates of the manor and entered the vibrantly decorated streets,

immediately becoming surrounded by the crowd, which bore down on them shoulder-to-shoulder. Brightly-lit fish and dragons danced alike among the houses, their brilliant light spilling out into the sky above the tides of people winding through the streets, who were shouting and laughing with joy and delight. This was the day in Da Liang in which ranks and titles mattered the least, and there was no marked difference today between the nobles and the commoners who traversed the city admiring the lanterns.

Some members of prestigious houses had even turned the playful tradition of dressing in white and wearing masks while going out to see the lanterns into a fashion of sorts, and while some of the upper-class women and well-bred young ladies used certain styles of cloth to denote their status, many others dressed up as commoners on purpose, their faces half-hidden under large hats as they moved about freely in the city. It was for this reason that the Lantern Festival was known as the best time for lovers to meet in secret.

Like all children, Fei Liu especially loved bright, glowing objects, and no matter whether they were rabbit lanterns, or goldfish lanterns, or horse lanterns, or fairy lanterns, or pumpkin lanterns, or butterfly lanterns.....he gazed in awe at every one, and each time Mei Changsu asked him, "Buy or not?", he would answer firmly, "Yes!", so that, before they had even gone down half a street, there were two or three lanterns in everyone's hands.

"Chief, this is not the way to pamper children...." Li Gang couldn't help saying apologetically. "At this rate, Fei Liu is going to move this whole street into our home...."

"Good!" The youth agreed immediately, delighted.

"Never mind, after we meet up with them later, have two of our people bring these lanterns back, we have a large courtyard anyway, and we can hang them up along the eaves of the roofs and let Fei Liu enjoy himself for a few days." Mei Changsu smilingly placated Li Gang, and then turned to Fei Liu to say, "Fei Liu,

according to the rules, these lanterns can only be hung up in the first month of the new year, so after the first month passes, we will have to take them down, understand?”

“Understand!”

Li Gang smiled ruefully, unable to add anything else, and so he craned his long neck and peered into the distance, saying, “There are so many people, how can we find them?”

“Look for the peach lanterns, we said we would meet them there....”

As soon as Mei Changsu spoke, one of the guards shouted, “Look there!”

Everyone turned to look in the direction he was pointing in, and about fifty paces away, there was a giant peach lantern glowing pink and yellow, eye-catching even amidst the thousands of lanterns hung up in the streets.

“It’s so big, we couldn’t miss it if we tried.” Mei Changsu smiled as he led them over to the lantern, and though it was only a short distance away, it was almost an hour before they managed to make their way over to it.

“Xiao Fei Liu, this peach lantern is for you, do you like it?” Yan Yujin grinned as he waved the long handle of the lantern.

“Ng!”

“Say thank you to Yan gege,” Mei Changsu reminded him.

“Thank you!”

“There are so many people, it will be dawn before we make it to your Miaoyin House....” Mei Changsu looked at the massive crowd and sighed. “I regret promising to come....”

“Don’t worry,” Xiao Jingrui said. “It is only the main streets that are so busy, if we take the small alleys, we can go straight to the back door of Miaoyin House. Yujin knows the way best, he takes it

almost every other day....”

Yan Yujin rolled his eyes. “So what if I know it well? That’s nothing to be ashamed of. The frankness of true heroes and the honesty of great scholars belies their outstanding natures...”

“Alright, hold on to the outstanding nature, we’d better go now, or the place you’ve booked will be cancelled by the time we arrive.... It’s rare to see Miss Gong Yu in the main hall, and they say she will be performing a new piece today too.” Xie Bi cut in, and the group began shoving their way through the crowd, only letting out a sigh of relief when they finally arrived at the entrance to the small alley.

Chapter 75: Gong Yu

Although the small alleys made for a less direct route compared to the main streets, in the end, the overall journey proved several times shorter. Striding along the moonlit paths of green-paved stone while the cacophony of human voices drifted over from a distance gave one the feeling of walking between lands of fire and ice. Spiral Market Street, when they finally arrived, was the picture of colourful luxury.

Yan Yujin enjoyed the pleasures of entertainment and was a regular guest at Miaoyin House, and the people he had brought with him were of no ordinary background, so as soon as the group entered the door, they were given an extremely warm welcome and escorted to their booked location by two pretty ladies in red robes.

The main performance hall of Miaoyin House was wide and spacious with high windows and a curved roof, making very good acoustic effects. By this time, the tables in the hall were almost full, but because there was a restriction on the number of guests, the hall was not crowded. Although many nobles of wealthy and powerful backgrounds had arrived a step too late and were not able to enter the hall, no one raised a fuss. This was partly because Miaoyin House had arranged entertainment in other halls, and partly because sons of noble houses were generally careful about their reputations, as very few of them were as lacking in class as He Wenxin, and so even if they were upset, they were not about to start a fight in an entertainment house and subject themselves to ridicule and gossip. Most of those who had managed to book places in advance were friends who frequented the entertainment houses together, and as Gong Yu had not appeared yet, everyone took the opportunity to walk around paying New Year's greetings to one another, and even Mei Changsu, who was sitting quietly at his place, received quite a few "Greetings, Mister Su", although he did

not seem to recognize the well-wishers.

The frenzy went on for some time, and though Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi both completed the appropriate social etiquettes and returned to their seats, Yan Yujin was still nowhere to be found, as it seemed as if he knew every single person in the hall, and so would not be returning to his place until the very last second.

“What is it, is Brother Su starting to regret coming out with us again?” Xie Bi asked with a smile, picking up the teapot to refill their cups.

Mei Changsu looked around and said with a sigh, “What music can be enjoyed in chaos like this?”

“That’s not true,” Xiao Jingrui was disagreeing with Brother Su for once. “Miss Gong Yu always captivates the entire hall with her beautiful music, so once she arrives, the disorder will turn into peace and quiet, don’t worry, Brother Su.”

As he spoke, two beats of a clapper suddenly sounded, and though the sound was not loud, it penetrated through the noisy chatter of the room, as if falling into place between the beats of a person’s heart, calming the soul and steadying the mind.

Mei Changsu raised an eyebrow, and when he turned to look, Yan Yujin had already flown back into his seat, his speed for once rivaling that of Fei Liu. Two long-haired children stepped out onto the stage set at the southern side of the hall and drew the red velvet curtain aside, revealing a zither and a stool, nothing more.

The audience’s gaze turned to the entrance at the left side of the stage, because that was where Gong Yu made her appearance those rare times she performed in the main performance hall. Sure enough, a moment later, a pink skirt appeared at the edge of the curtain, and an embroidered shoe with yellow pompoms hovered at the corner for a long moment before stepping forward, bringing the entire figure of its owner into the view of the audience.

“Aww.....” A murmur of disappointment spread throughout the hall.

“Everyone here is a frequent guest and old friend of Miaoyin House, so try and give this mother a little face, will you?” The mother in charge of the household of Miaoyin House, Third Aunt Shen, waved her handkerchief and smiled. “Miss Gong Yu will be here in a few moments, you don’t need to look at me like that.”

Although Third Aunt Shen was middle-aged, she had aged well and was still quite attractive, and as she wandered through the hall joking and teasing, she left joyful laughter in her wake. Everyone was distracted by her entertaining, and when they turned their attention back to the stage, they realized that Miss Gong Yu was already sitting before the zither, having appeared without anyone’s notice.

As the leading lady of Miaoyin House, Gong Yu, who sold her art rather than her body, was undoubtedly the most exclusive lady on Spiral Market Street, and although she was not famous for her appearance, this was only because her musical talent was truly dazzling. In fact, Gong Yu was very beautiful, with her slender brows, her almond-shaped eyes, and her skin like snowy-jade, and she carried an air of concentration about her, without the slightest sign of weakness and frailty, so that even if she wore only a long robe of raw white silk, she gave off an appearance of an ethereal fairy of sorts.

Although she had never been named to the Langya Lists, no one could deny that Gong Yu was a beauty.

Seeing that everyone had noticed Gong Yu’s appearance, Third Aunt Shen quietly slipped off to one side and seated herself on a chair in the corridor, silently observing the situation in the hall.

In contrast to Third Aunt Shen’s teasing banter, Gong Yu did not say anything, only tuned her zither and smiled before raising a gentle hand to begin playing.

The first three songs were ancient melodies everyone was familiar with – The Three Passages of Yangguan, Wild Geese over Sand, and A Conversation between Fishermen. But it was because the songs were so familiar that they even more noticeably demonstrated the skill and art of the musician. And with a musician like Gong Yu, mistakes were virtually non-existent, and her music drifted gently into the hearts of all who listened, seeming to wash over their very souls as it painted vivid images of the stories woven into its tune.

When these three songs ended, one of the children brought her a lute. As the music went on to illustrate the bitterness and frustration of The Autumn Moon over Han Palace, and then the bright clear elegance of A Moonlit Night on the Spring River, everyone seemed half-dazed by the winding melodies, stunned into silence.

Yan Yujin, his mind still intoxicated by the beautiful music, gripped the jade hairpin in his hand tightly as he recited, “The spring river rises high as the sea, the bright moon waxes with the tide. Its light shines the length of the river, illuminating its waves for a thousand miles. The river winds around a fragrant island, its flowers bright as snow in the moonlight glow. The frost in the air is concealed in its beam, the white sand of the beach all but invisible. No dust mars the perfect river scene, in the clear glow of the lonely wheel in the sky. Who first looked up to admire the moon? When did the moon first shine upon man? Life passes by and generations come and go, but the riverside moon changes not with time. We know not for whom the riverside moon waits, we only see the ceaseless river flow.”

As he spoke, Gong Yu’s gaze passed over him lightly, and then one jade finger plucked at her bowstring, accompanying his poetry with song and his verses with music, and the two continued in such perfect harmony that it was as if they had practiced many times before. When the recitation was over and the music ended,

the hall was quiet. Gong Yu raised her narrow eyebrows and called for wine, and one of the children immediately brought forward a gold bottle and a jade cup. She filled a cup and drank, then returned her hand to her lute, and suddenly, a sound like wind and thunder filled the room.

“Mister Shisan’s new composition, Wandering with Wine, please enjoy.”

Just this simple sentence, with no superfluous detail. When the music began, it invoked sounds of spears on glaciers, and though it was filled with unrestrained despair, the tone was not overpowering, now bringing to mind a wild drunkenness, now singing of great strength and lofty ambitions. All of these contrasting pictures were meticulously woven into the fabric of the ancient music, filling the dazed audience with a nameless passion, and many of them couldn’t help lifting their wine cups in a toast and then draining their contents.

When the song ended, Gong Yu rose slowly and curtsied, and after a moment of astonished silence, the hall broke out into rapturous applause.

“If we had only heard the last song this entire evening, I would still be perfectly satisfied.” Xiao Jingrui, who had unknowingly finished two cups of wine, now sighed. “This composition of Mister Shisan’s has such a wild melody, even men playing drums would find it difficult to express the power and strength of its music. Who could have guessed that Miss Gong Yu’s gentle fingers could hold such wind and thunder in their grasp? It makes me ashamed of myself.”

“Your musical tastes are fine indeed if you can have such an understanding of the piece.” Mei Changsu raised his cup to his lips and sipped lightly, then turned his gaze to Gong Yu on the stage, meeting her eyes momentarily.

Their gazes met only for a brief moment, but a faint blush was

already spreading over Gong Yu's cheeks, the light colour making her appear even more beautiful. She stood and curtsied again in response to the applause, and then slowly took a few steps forward and said lightly with a sweet smile, "Please, I ask for silence."

The gentle words should have disappeared into the noise of the hall without much effect, but at the same moment, the clapper sounded again, seeming to penetrate straight into the hearts of everyone present, and the hall immediately settled into silence.

"Tonight is the Lantern Festival, and it is my honour and privilege to have such distinguished guests attend my Miaoyin House," Gong Yu was smiling, her voice clear as a silver bell, and her audience leaned closer, listening attentively. "Gong Yu has devised a little game for everyone's entertainment, I wonder if anyone would be interested?"

As soon as they heard that there were more activities in store, all of the guests were delighted and immediately began shouting, "Yes! Yes!"

"This game is called 'Discerning the Instrument from its Sound'. As there are many of you, to avoid confusion, let each table form a team according to the current seating arrangement. I will play music behind the curtain, and you will discern the instrument from the nature of its sound. Gong Yu will have a grand prize for the team with the greatest number of correct answers."

Everyone present had certain standards of musical taste and knowledge, so this would not be any difficult task, and they all called out their agreement. Gong Yu smiled again and disappeared, and the two children came forward to close the curtains. The hall slowly quieted, each person listening intently.

Afer a moment, the first sound carried out from behind the curtain. Because almost everyone present was a frequent guest of the establishment, playing an entire piece would make the game too simple, so she only played the first note.

After a moment of silence, someone stood up from a table near the eastern window and called out loudly, “Huqin!”

A little girl ran over and presented him with a peony made of silk, and he sat down again delightedly.

The second sound was heard. Xiao Jingrui immediately waved his hand and said, smiling, “Hujia!”

The little girl rushed over and handed him a peony. Yan Yujin huffed and complained that his friend’s “mouth is too quick”, and Xie Bi laughed, shoving him as he scolded, “We’re on the same team!”

The third sound was heard. Yan Yujin shot to his feet, shouting, “Luguan!” And so they acquired another peony.

The fourth sound was heard. The son of the Imperial Uncle and a person from another table cried out, “Konghou” nearly simultaneously. The little girl looked back and forth between them, perplexed, and then probably decided that this table already had two flowers and chose to favour the underdog in handing out the next flower.

The fifth sound was heard. In the silence that followed, Mei Changsu said something quietly in Xie Bi’s ear, and Xie Bi immediately raised his hand and said, “Tongjiao!”

“What’s a tongjiao?” Yan Yujin asked, dumbfounded, looking at the peony in Xie Bi’s hand.

“It is often found in military fortresses on the borders, is used in ceremonial and military music, and is usually made from the horns of different animals. You young men from the capital seldom have the chance to encounter it.” Mei Changsu had just finished explaining when the sixth sound was heard. Because his table had been listening to him speak, they were distracted, and someone from the table beside them was already shouting, “Guxun!”

Afterwards, the hengdi, banggu, xiqin, tongse, shiqing,

fangxiang, and paixiao were all played one by one. With Mei Changsu's musical ability and Yan Yujin's quick reflexes, this strong team naturally seized the victory.

At the end, the curtain fluttered lightly as a crisp sound carried out from its depths.

The hall was silent for a long moment, and a few people stood up, only to sit down again without speaking. Yan Yujin frowned in deep thought for a long time, and finally gave up and asked, "Brother Su, do you know what that was?"

Mei Changsu held back a smile and whispered two words in his ear. Yan Yujin's eyes widened and he blurted out, "Wooden fish?!"

As soon as he spoke, the little girl ran over, and at the same moment, the curtain opened, and Gong Yu cast her gaze lightly around the hall, smiling when she saw the pile of peonies on their table.

"Grand prize! Grand prize!" Yan Yujin waved delightedly at Gong Yu. "What grand prize is Miss Gong Yu going to give us?"

Gong Yu's eyes shone, a sweet smile on her powdered face as she said calmly, "Although Gong Yu is a performer, she seldom ventures to display her skills outside of Miaoyin House, but as a gift to the winners, if any of you are hosting a dinner or a banquet soon, Gong Yu will come and entertain for a day."

Everyone gasped in wonder. Gong Yu was not an ordinary musician who answered to the summons of manors and residences, and with her proud nature, not even the sons of nobles or imperial families had ever been able to convince her to step out of Spiral Market Street, so an offer to play at a private banquet was completely unheard of, and everyone in the hall was both astonished and envious. Yan Yujin was smiling so widely his eyes had almost disappeared. "If Miss Gong Yu is willing to attend, I will arrange a banquet no matter what!"

Mei Changsu cocked his head slightly and lowered his voice to ask, "Is there a time limit to Miss Gong Yu's promise? Must it be within these few days, or can it be delayed a bit, for example to April...."

His words immediately reminded Yan Yujin, who hurriedly asked, "That's right, what about mid-April?"

Gong Yu smiled. "I will answer your summons anytime within this year."

"Wonderful!" Yan Yujin thumped Xiao Jingrui on the back. "This is a gift worthy of your birthday banquet!"

Xiao Jingrui knew his good intention and so spoke no word of protest. He had always been allowed to do whatever he wished at his birthday banquet, and once, a friend had even carried in a beautiful lady wrapped in a fine gauze sack and had bumped into his father on the way, and his father had only shook his head and laughed. So a renowned musician like Gong Yu would be no problem indeed, and besides, Grand Princess Liyang loved music, but it was not proper for her to visit Miaoyin House herself, so this opportunity to have Gong Yu play for his mother was truly a rare stroke of fortune.

"Then it's settled, April twelfth, Miss Gong Yu is invited to the imperial Ning residence." Yan Yujin said decisively, clapping his hands together.

Xie Bi began teasing his older brother, pretending to be jealous that he always seemed to receive the best fruits of their labour, while other people came by to offer their congratulations. Yan Yujin was chatting animatedly with everyone around him, and even Gong Yu was smiling faintly as she fiddled with the hair falling around her face. In all the chaos, only Mei Changsu sat quietly with his eyes lowered, gazing at the wine in the jade cup before him. A moment later, he lifted the cup and upended it, swallowing down along with his wine the silent sigh that had risen

to his lips.

Chapter 76: Illegal Fireworks Factory

After the new year, the tension in the city seemed to be loosening slowly, at least on the surface. In the palace, Consort Yue was focusing on giving a weak and fragile appearance, while the Empress was putting all her energy into taking care of the Six Palaces, and so the two had not had any major disputes in some time. In the court, although the Crown Prince and Prince Yu still disagreed on many aspects, because there had been no new triggers or inciting factors, they seemed to be clashing less often, and they had not had an open fight since the Emperor resumed court, and everyone was finding the atmosphere almost a little too peaceful.

Sure enough, the tranquil and idle days couldn't last. On the twenty-first of the first month of the year, an enormous crash shook half of the capital.

Mei Changsu, who had been sitting by the window enjoying the warm winter sun, felt an almost imperceptible tremor, and about an hour later, he found out that the tremor had not been an illusion.

“The gunpowder stored in the illegal fireworks factory exploded by accident?” When he heard the news Li Gang immediately brought over, Mei Changsu closed his eyes and murmured to himself, “Prince Yu is indeed even crueler than I.....that he could actually escalate the situation to such a degree....”

“They say it is because there has been no snow recently and the weather dry, and also because of the inauspicious position of Mars. The entire illegal fireworks factory was leveled to the ground, and by initial estimates, more than ninety households nearby have been affected, most of them by the great fire that arose in the wake of the explosion, which burned down half the street and left behind heavy casualties. Because not all of the bodies have been found, it is difficult to determine how many are dead, but there were a few dozen inside the illegal fireworks factory alone, and

including the commoners who have been affected, there must be at least a hundred or more....”

“The wounded?”

“Nearly a hundred and fifty, with about thirty seriously wounded.”

“What about the fire?”

“Fortunately there is no wind today, so it has not spread to the next street, and it has largely been contained. But the blaze was very large initially, and there were only a few people from the Capital Magistrate Office there at the beginning, and even with the combined efforts of the commoners who came to help, they could not control it at all. The neighbouring houses were all rushing to save their valuables, while some of the worse crowds were making a rush for the goods in the houses, and when the Capital Patrol arrived, they spent half the time suppressing the crowds and the other half taking whatever profits from the situation they could, and the situation was really very chaotic until His Highness Prince Jing’s personal troops arrived and took control of the situation. Later, His Highness Prince Jing provided some of the army’s tents for temporary use by the injured and those who lost their homes. The physicians and medicines of the Imperial Hospital are officially regulated and so could not be sent over immediately, so His Highness provided funds for the use of resources in the community. I have already dispatched our Medicine Sect brothers in the capital to go over and provide what aid they can.”

“Well done,” Mei Changsu praised, adding, “Burns are difficult to treat, the Yun household of Xunyang district has a good salve for this purpose. Send someone with a fast horse to go and bring back a batch for Prince Jing.”

“Yes.”

Mei Changsu’s gaze shimmered as he said, “The first month is almost over, and the time of greatest danger should have passed,

but then a tragic accident happens at a time like this, the timing is a little too coincidental.....pass on my orders to focus the investigation on Prince Yu, and to search out any possible evidence of his involvement in this accident. So many lives, we cannot just let them disappear without trace or sound..... if there are any developments, inform me in secret immediately.”

“Yes.”

After Li Gang bowed and left, Mei Changsu got up slowly and walked over to his desk, took out a snowy white sheet of paper, and began drawing with brush and ink, wanting to settle his mind and emotions. Fei Liu came in and picked up a brush too, sprawling beside him silently as he drew, quietly keeping him company. As the shadows lengthened outside the window, Mei Changsu’s mind slowly calmed. He finished one piece, and as he stood, he felt a slight aching at his waist, and the youth beside him raised his head, his beautiful eyes wide with concern.

“Fei Liu, go out and play?”

“No!” The youth shook his head.

“Then.....go out for a walk with Su gege?”

“Alright!”

Mei Changsu took down a fur-collared cloak from a hanger nearby, put it on, and then walked out the door. When the guards in the courtyard saw him dressed to go out, they hurried to prepare his palanquin. The row of people left by the main gates and then followed Mei Changsu’s direction down a small alley, arriving a street filled with smoke.

Although a proper blockade had not been set up, the men of the Capital Magistrate Office had formed groups of twos and threes and were working to prevent people from entering the area, and from a distance, it looked as if half the street was a ruin of crumbled walls and bricks, the smell of smoke still lingering

heavily in the air, and the glow of fire could still be seen occasionally as the soldiers of the Capital Patrol threw water over the burning areas. Mei Changsu got off his palanquin and walked into the street, and the guards, seeing his commoner's attire, did not know where he had come from and so came over to inquire, though they seemed amiable in nature.

"I am....." Mei Changsu was just thinking about what would be most appropriate when he suddenly saw Lie Zhanying of the imperial Jing residence, and he lifted his head and waved in greeting.

Lie Zhanying had not actually spoken with Mei Changsu before, but he had developed a deep impression of this Mister Su who had led to so much reorganizing and retraining of the interior of the imperial Jing household, and so he immediately answered his greeting with a polite reply.

The guards looked at the two exchanging greetings and thought he was a member of the imperial Jing residence, and so they quickly retreated to one side. Mei Changsu hurried over and asked, "Where is His Highness Prince Jing?"

"Inside....." Lie Zhanying gestured, and then finding the situation a little unusual, asked, "Did His Highness arrange to meet Mister here?"

Mei Changsu turned to look at him and said purposefully, "No, His Highness has been hiding and refusing to see me, so when I heard he was here today, I came out to find him."

"Ah?" Lie Zhangying was taken aback, but Mei Changsu had already strode on ahead, and by the time he caught up, Prince Jing was just appearing from the center with his personal guard, and the three met in the middle.

"Mister Su?" Prince Jing looked a bit surprised, but seemed to understand instantly. "Nothing that happens in the capital escapes the eye of Mister."

Mei Changsu looked around. Although cries of mournful weeping could be heard, there were no survivors left homeless on the streets. Tents were set up on both sides of the road, and soldiers were carrying steaming plates of hot food between them. The herbal scent of medicine drifted over from another part of the street, and a stretcher draped in white cloth was carried past them.

“If this was a battlefield, it would be nothing remarkable, but such a scene in the flourishing capital of Da Liang is really too tragic,” Mei Changsu sighed. “Your Highness has worked hard.”

“They are all hardworking commoners, who had no way of knowing that there was a fireworks factory right beside their homes.” Prince Jing sighed as well, and signaled Lie Zhanying to retreat. “The timing is truly unfortunately, if only one more day could have gone by without incident....”

Mei Changsu raised an eyebrow. “Your Highness’ meaning is?”

“Shen Zhui was very excited when he told me yesterday that he had finally acquired enough evidence to prove that the Crown Prince had conspired with Lou Zhijing of the Ministry of Revenue in setting up this illegal fireworks factory for private profit, and it was only that he did not have the power to seize it immediately, so he reported it to the Emperor, asking for permission to have the Capital Magistrate Office assist in seizing this fireworks factory, confiscating all illegal goods and arresting the suspects. At the time, he told me very confidently that permission would be given within one or two days. Who could have thought.....the report had only been handed over for a day when this tragic accident occurred, and a hundred human lives were incinerated into smoke and ashes.....to most of those involved, this was an entirely absurd calamity.”

Mei Changsu looked at him deeply. “Your Highness believes this was an accident?”

Prince Jing’s gaze froze, and he slowly turned his head to Mei

Changsu, his tone dripping with ice, “What is Mister Su implying?”

“As a successor accusing his predecessor of misconduct, even if Shen Zhui gathered piles of witnesses and evidence and raised this case to the heavens, in the end, it would only be a case of corruption and negligence. The Crown Prince is the Crown Prince, and so no matter how His Majesty chooses to deal with him, the punishment will not be anything significant. But now, with the explosion, the whole situation has become public knowledge, and when all is said and done, a hundred human lives have been lost, and so the passion and anger of the people will slowly grow into a rage of discontent. I fear the Crown Prince’s punishment will be much more severe than it would have been before. Your Highness, think carefully, this case implicates the Crown Prince, and the Crown Prince must take the fall, so who will benefit?”

“So Prince Yu has treated all these human lives as his playthings, only to increase the blow to the Crown Prince?” Prince Jing’s face was thunderous, his skin drawn tight over his rapidly darkening expression, lines like iron spreading out from the corner of his lips. After these furious words, he suddenly turned his glare onto Mei Changsu. “Is this the brilliant plan Mister Su has concocted for Prince Yu?”

At first Mei Changsu thought he had misheard, but when he turned his head and met Prince Jing’s eyes, he gradually realized that he had indeed said what he thought he had heard. Although it was a misunderstanding, and although, in the present circumstances, it was not really anything worth getting angry about, for some reason, Mei Changsu felt a sense of fury rising in his chest, and he controlled it forcefully for a long moment before answering coldly, “No. These are all conclusions I drew after the events took place, based on investigation and analysis.”

Prince Jing saw his expression and heard the coldness in his tone, and knew he had spoken wrongly, and he hurried to say

apologetically, "It was my misunderstanding, please do not take it to heart."

Mei Changsu turned his head indifferently, looking over at the rooftops darkened by soot and ash from the smoke, and did not reply. Prince Jing had always been proud and aloof, and was not given to apologizing a second time if the other person did not accept his first apology, and so a cold silence settled between the two of them.

At this moment, one of the historians of the imperial Jing residence ran over to report, "My lord, your servant has already completed the investigation by your orders, and aside from the supplies from the residence, two hundred tents from the military supplies were also used, as well as four hundred and fifty cotton quilts. These are all military supplies, should I make a report to the Ministry of War?"

"It is good that you reminded me, or I would have forgotten. Although this is not anything major, it would be better to report their use to the Ministry of War."

"Yes, sir." The historian was about to leave when Mei Changsu suddenly said something in a low voice, and he spoke so quietly that even Prince Jing, who was standing only a step beside him, was not sure whether he had heard correctly, but when he turned to look at him, he found that the other stood with his gaze lowered, his demeanor calm, showing no intention of repeating himself, and, feeling something stir in his heart, he turned back to his historian and said, "You have many things to deal with at present, carry on as if I had forgotten, and you forgot as well, and do not make your report to the Ministry of War for now."

The historian could not think of a reason behind this strange order and stared at him open-mouthed for a long moment until Prince Jing raised an eyebrow, and he hurriedly answered, "Yes, sir," before rushing away.

When he was a good distance away, Prince Jing said slowly, "Mister is aware that, although these military supplies have been distributed to me, if I use them for the care of the victims of this disaster, then I am using them for purposes other than those for which they were originally supplied to me, and thus, according to the rules I should notify the Ministry of War, so why did Mister ask me not to make the report?"

"Are we currently at war?"

"No."

"Is this a very large amount of military supplies?"

"It is an almost negligible amount."

"Can tents and cotton quilts not be reused?"

"Certainly they can be reused."

"Since this is not wartime, and the tents and cotton quilts lent out can be retrieved, then why such a great fuss?"

"Although it is a small matter, according to the regulations, I should still let them know...."

"What happens if you do not?"

A hint of doubt appeared in Prince Jing's gaze. "Mister should know that the Ministry of War is the Crown Prince's territory, and although this fault is small, once it has been seized by the Ministry of War, I fear they would use it against me."

"I want them to use it against you." Mei Changsu turned slightly, facing Prince Jing. "Your Highness cares about the public and has treated the victims with such kindness and generosity, is this a bad thing?"

"Of course not..."

"Your Highness has done a good thing, and has committed only a tiny fault that is not even worth mentioning, so the Ministry of War should look generously on your momentary carelessness, but

instead, they will seize on it and refuse to let it go. Once it reaches the court, will the officials think that it is Your Highness' crime that cannot be forgiven, or that the Crown Prince is using the Ministry of War against you?" An icy smile lingered at the corner of Mei Changsu's lips. "The court is yet far from belonging to the Crown Prince entirely, and even if the Ministry of War attacks you, you have only to confess that you had a momentary lapse of memory in the urgency and complications of the situation, and then, even if Prince Yu does not speak up for you, there will naturally be upright officials who will see the injustice and come to argue on your behalf, so what is there to worry about?"

Prince Jing answered proudly, "I am not afraid of what the Ministry of War will do to me, and even if Father Emperor punishes me strictly, I do not care about a little accusation such as this, it is only that this mistake could have been prevented entirely, so why must I make such a great deal out of it?"

Mei Changsu's smile grew even colder. "Why should we not? The eyes of the court officials are still fixed on the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, so how many of them notice the things Your Highness is doing? Although you must work more and speak less, even if you yourself don't speak, others may speak for you. Once the Ministry of War raises the issue, the Emperor and all the ministers of the court will see, while the Crown Prince and Prince Yu were busy quarreling, who was the one controlling the situation? Who was the one reassuring the hearts of the people? Who was the one working quietly without complaint or conflict, but who is now being attacked instead? Everyone has a scale in his heart to measure right and wrong, and to balance justice and injustice. On the other hand, if your Highness reports this now to the Ministry of War, although the regulations would be followed flawlessly, it would achieve the opposite effect, and end up burying Your Highness' good deeds, and no one would come to know of them."

Prince Jing's thick brows furrowed. "I am not doing these things

for others to see.”

Mei Changsu laughed coldly. “If, before you acted, you thought only of doing these things for others to see, then that would be a fault of Your Highness’ moral character. But if, after you have done these good deeds, no one knows about them, then that would be the fault of your strategist.... Even if only for my sake, pray Your Highness suffer this grievance.”

Prince Jing heard the mocking in his tone and the sharpness of his words, and knew that he was not entirely placated from the previous misunderstanding, and so he was not angry, and only answered indifferently, “Mister is only doing this for my sake, how could I speak of grievance? This is Mister’s thorough consideration, I am ashamed of my ineptitude. Let it all be done as you say.”

Chapter 77: Shen Zhui

If anyone had been watching from the sidelines, they would have found the interaction between these two very strange. The lord had no intention of speaking coaxing words, and the subordinate was equally unwilling to yield gently to his will, and now and again they seemed to exchange cold retorts and sharp words. But you could not say there was truly any enmity between them, as they laid everything out plainly before the other, and did not hide behind suspicions and doubts.

Fortunately, both of them found their current method of communication rather satisfactory, and had no complaints.

“Your Highness, how has Tingsheng been recently?” Mei Changsu asked mildly, clasping his hands behind his back.

“Very good, his studies and martial arts have both improved, his spirit is growing steadier by the day, and everyone in the manor is very fond of him.” Prince Jing glanced at him, and he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “I’ve been meaning to ask you, you care about Tingsheng so much, did you know my eldest royal brother in the past?”

“I care about Tingsheng in order to gain Your Highness’ favour, of course.”

Prince Jing was a little angered by Mei Changsu’s indifferent tone, and his voice was tight as he said, “I am asking you seriously!”

“Hm, His Highness Prince Qi.....” Mei Changsu’s gaze skipped lightly to the black smoke billowing into the sky in the distance. “I have always admired him, and once thought of striving for great ambitions under his command, it is a pity.....” He suddenly halted, looked meaningfully at Prince Jing, and then turned and walked away quickly.

Prince Jing stared after him, then turned and looked in the direction Mei Changsu had indicated and saw a figure emerging from the tents. The thirty-eight year old official made his way over to Prince Jing laboriously, waving in greeting.

“Greet, greetings, Your Highness.....” Because he was a little plump, by the time the official arrived before him, he was slightly out of breath. He cupped his hands in greeting and said, “Such a great tragedy, it is fortunate that Your Highness has arrived to take control of the situation, I was out in the city today so I only just arrived, but the Ministry of Revenue can take over the follow-up work from here, Your Highness does not need to worry.”

“It all concerns the people, there is no need to draw such lines of division.” Prince Jing smiled faintly, glancing in the direction in which Mei Changsu had disappeared.Had he left because he saw Shen Zhui coming? Did he not want this loyal and upright official Prince Jing was currently befriending to realize the connection between the two of them?

“Just now, it looked like Your Highness was talking with someone, did he leave? Who was it?” Shen Zhui himself had distant relations to the imperial family, and plus he had a certain chemistry with Prince Jing, so the interactions between the two were rather casual, and he often asked whatever came to mind without first considering whether it was strictly appropriate.

Prince Jing hesitated for a moment, but answered finally, “That was Su Zhe, you must have heard of his name, it has gathered some renown in the city recently.”

“Oh?” Shen Zhui rose to his tiptoes and peered into the distance, but of course he did not see anything. “So that was the famous qilin prodigy? It is too bad I couldn’t get a clear look. I hear he has recently been working for Prince Yu, how come Your Highness also knows him?”

“I don’t just know him, he has been to my residence as well,”

Prince Jing said indifferently. “This person certainly lives up to his name, and is superior to most in both knowledge and conduct. You have always valued talent, if you have the chance to meet him in the future, you will certainly come to admire him.”

“Talent is well and good, but how is his heart?” Shen Zhui urged solemnly, “It is said that most of this person’s talent lies in the shifting of power and strategy, Your Highness should employ extra caution when dealing with people like him.”

“Ng, I will take care.” Prince Jing nodded and did not elaborate.

“But what is he doing here in circumstances like these?” Shen Zhui looked around. “Unless he is here to sound out the situation for His Highness Prince Yu?”

“You don’t know, this Mister Su has always had a thorough grasp of everything that happens in the capital, so it is not surprising that he would come to look around after such a great disturbance occurred.” Prince Jing’s expression grew more serious. “Don’t be so curious about him. This whole situation will reach the Emperor’s ear by tomorrow, have you thought about how to handle it?”

Shen Zhui sobered as well, as he answered, “There isn’t much to think about, I can only report what has occurred. I have collected Lou Zhijing’s records over the years, and even have in my hands the secret ledger recording the division of profit over the years between him and the Crown Prince. To tell you the truth, assassins came to my manor just yesterday.”

Prince Jing was a little shaken, and grasped him by the shoulder. “Are you injured?”

Shen Zhui, touched, laughed as he answered hurriedly, “I was born lucky, and have always been favoured by fortune. But that assassin really was vicious, and all the guards of my manor, those three-legged cats, were not his match. Fortunately, a martial arts expert appeared out of nowhere to help us, but he disappeared as

soon as he had scared away the assassin and did not even leave behind a name, and so I still do not know who it was that saved my life.”

“Did you see his face?”

“He wore a mask, but his eyes were large and bright, and he looked very young.”

“Then the secret ledger.....”

“I handed it over to the Xuanjing Bureau long ago, and asked them to deliver it directly to the Emperor. At least the evidence is safe, so killing me will not accomplish anything.” Shen Zhui laughed happily. “That’s why I still dare to walk around in the open like this.”

“Don’t be too careless, even if they cannot kill you to silence you, revenge is still a terrible thing.” Prince Jing spoke seriously. “The Ministry of Revenue fell to ruin under Lou Zhijing and it is up to you to restore it, so this is a matter of national importance, with great implication for the people. If anything happened to you, who could pick up the reins of such a great responsibility?”

“I am endlessly grateful for Your Highness’ great kindness.” Shen Zhui sighed. “As a loyal servant of the kingdom, I am not afraid of difficulty, and I will not lightly hand this duty over to another. It is a pity that those with true power in the court only pay attention to the games of strategy and the forming of camps, and leave the ones who are truly working hard for their country with no way up the ladder, there is only Your Highness.....”

“Alright,” Prince Jing cut him off. “We have said before that we will not discuss these things. Investigating this case is a great work of labour for you, and may also be the beginning of calamity, I am not satisfied with the guards in your manor, but it would not be appropriate for me to directly transfer some of my people to your residence, so would you mind if I brought in a few people from outside? Don’t worry, they will all be trustworthy and capable

men.”

“What is Your Highness saying, do you think I cannot recognize worthy men when I see them?” Shen Zhui thanked him gratefully and the two parted after a few more words, both having many things to take care of, and Prince Jing returned to his manor while Shen Zhui took a few of his men with him to take care of matters at the scene of the explosion.

The echoing ripples of the great explosion of the illegal fireworks factory were frightening to behold. Although there were attempts to play down its ties to the Crown Prince, the facts were the facts. The Emperor, in a thundering rage, ordered the Crown Prince to move to Guijia Palace and confined him there for self-reflection, forbidding him from so much as hearing news of anything that happened in the court. Because almost thirty officials were implicated in the case, Shen Zhui was officially raised to the position of Minister of Revenue, and aside from his normal responsibilities, received the imperial order to revise the revenue system in order to prevent future oversights.

This whole case had only lasted five days from explosion to conclusion, but because the evidence was iron-clad, even the Crown Prince himself found it difficult to dispute, and naturally the other ministers could find no opening to argue for him. Aside from Consort Yue’s wailing in the Inner Palace, no one dared to openly intercede for the Crown Prince. But in the whole proceedings, one person’s attitude caught everyone’s attention, and that was the Crown Prince’s arch-enemy, Prince Yu. By all logic, he was the person most delighted with the Crown Prince’s massive fall, and it was completely unlike him not to add insult to injury at every possibly opportunity, but the shocking thing was, this time, he must have received some mysterious advice, as he was acting completely opposite to his normal temperament, and not only refrained from commenting on the case from start to finish, he even restrained his own officials so that the court did not

disintegrate into a frenzy of attacks against the Crown Prince. The genius of this approach was that, on the surface, it made this case appear completely unrelated to the fight for the throne, and it seemed only to concern the corrupted values and stained morals of the Crown Prince's person, and as the Emperor had no reason to suspect that Prince Yu had played any part in the case, he turned the full force of his wrath onto the Crown Prince alone.

One could only guess who had taught him such a brilliant move, and very few knew that, on the day the Crown Prince relocated to his new dwelling, Prince Yu joyfully hand-picked a selection of new gifts and had them sent over to Su Zhe's manor, although they were not received in the end.

This repulsive case infuriated the Emperor, but at the same time, it also made this old man who had passed the prime of his years very tired, so that when Meng Zhi came before him at the end of the month to confess his guilt, claiming that he had not been able to complete the investigation of the murder of the internal guards before the deadline, he felt no great emotion, and after fining him three months' worth of his salary and replacing the two Vice Commander Generals of the Imperial Guard, he let the matter pass and did not speak of it again.

Prince Jing did indeed receive a notice from the Ministry of War accusing him of misusing military supplies without notifying the ministry, and the day after he confessed to his crime in court, the new Minister of Revenue Shen Zhui made a passionate speech, mounting a furious defense on Prince Jing's behalf. Although Xiao Jingyan was willful and stubborn by nature, he had always been low-key, and recently his performance had been very good, and the number of those in court who were developing a good impression of him were growing by the day, and even the Emperor's dislike for him was lessening gradually, as the old dispute had not been raised between them for many years. In this current matter, the Emperor did not think Prince Jing had committed any great fault and so did

not punish him, instead even bestowing a few words of praise for “dealing with the situation in a decisive and timely matter, and lightening the burdens of the court,” and ordered him to write up an official report of the events. So the Ministry of War had not only failed to strike a blow, they had accidentally showcased the accomplishments of their opponent, and the Crown Prince’s camp was only digging themselves into an even greater hole.

With the passing of the Spring Equinox, the days were growing warmer, and spring was in the air, as flowers began blooming and grass appeared on the ground once more. Some people began impatiently shedding the thick layers of their winter garments, running out of the city to enjoy the weather. Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin came a few times to visit, but Mei Changsu still couldn’t stand the cold and was not very willing to leave his manor, and so the two could only go out by themselves.

Jinling was very beautiful, with plenty of natural scenery nearby perfectly suited to springtime viewing – there were the weeping willow-covered shores of Fuxian Lake, the pear blossom slopes of Manyu Hill, and the peach blossom valleys of Haishen Town. All three of these scenic areas were to the south of the city, and as a result, the road leading out of the southern Nanyue Gate was very busy, with temporary marketplaces set up to both sides of the road selling snacks, tea, crafts and toys, and business was doing very well.

On the road back to the city, Xiao Jingrui saw a group of plump little dolls made out of glazed clay, and, finding their expressions rather cute, decided to buy them for his little sister, who was becoming a little low-spirited in her pregnancy. The stall owner carefully wrapped each in paper and placed them into a small box, and Yan Yujin, who was feeling thirsty, went ahead first to a tea stall for some tea.

A few minutes later, Xiao Jingrui came over with the small box, carefully setting it down on the table before sitting down and

picking up his own cup of tea. Yan Yujin eyed the box and propped his chin on his hands, smiling. “Will Qi jie like it?”

“These dolls are so cute, even I like them, so xiao Qi will certainly like them.”

“You’re such a good brother, thinking of your little sister even on an outing like this. Xie Xu is going back to the academy tomorrow, why don’t you buy something for him to bring back?”

“He likes jade, I already picked out a piece for him at the jade shop and had it sent directly to our home, it’s probably reached his hands by now.”

Yan Yujin clicked his tongue. “There’s just no fault to be found with you. Actually, don’t you want Xie Xu to stay past your birthday before leaving?”

“It’s right for third brother to value his studies, and it’s only for these few years.” Xiao Jingrui looked at Yan Yujin, teasing, “You’re the one who wants him to stay, so you can keep bullying him around, isn’t that right?”

“He’s going crazy from all that studying, what with that sour air of his, always looking down his nose at everyone around him. If I don’t bully him from time to time, he’ll turn into a little fool. If he turns out to have even half of your warmth, that would be something.”

“All three of us brothers have different temperaments, it would be a strange thing indeed if we were all alike.” Xiao Jingrui picked up the teapot and refilled Yan Yujin’s cup. “Aren’t we drinking tea? So drink then, he’s not your brother, why are you so worried?”

Yan Yujin thumped his friend’s shoulder vigorously. “He’s not my brother, you are! If he turns out to be good for nothing in the future, the one who will be most worried will definitely be you, this dage!”

“Xie Xu, good for nothing?” Xiao Jingrui laughed in spite of himself. “He’s the one with the best prospects. Amongst the three of us brothers, I am the most unremarkable, without talent or accomplishment in the scholarly or martial arts, and with no plans for an official career. I’ve passed most of my life in such an idle manner, I won’t bring much glory to the Xie clan.”

“Why is the runner-up of the Gentlemen’s List suddenly being so humble? Are you fishing for compliments?” Yan Yujin pursed his lips.

“Before, I did have the heart to strive for a name and reputation for myself in jianghu. But now, I only want peace and quiet, and I have lost much of that passion, so the Gentlemen’s List will certainly not have my name on it next year.”

“It doesn’t matter if it has you or not, so long as it still has me, I rather like having such a reputation, it’s so cool.....”

Xiao Jingrui couldn’t hold back his laughter and was about to retort when the guest at the table beside him got up, the large bag on his back swinging around and almost knocking the box of clay dolls onto the ground. Fortunately, Xiao Jingrui’s hands were as quick as his eyes, and he grabbed them just in time, murmuring to himself, “Lucky catch, lucky catch.”

“They’re only clay dolls, and the stall is just over there, if they break, you can just go buy another set, why are you so worked up?”

“This was the last set, if they break, where would I find another?” Xiao Jingrui carefully placed the box aside. “Xiao Qi has been unhappy for some time, I want her to see these dolls and be happy for awhile.”

“Unhappy for some time?” Yan Yujin’s pupils seemed to darken slightly. “Is it because of...Brother Qingyao’s illness?”

“Yes,” Xiao Jingrui let out a sigh. “Ever since Qingyao dage

suddenly fell ill last month, it has taken him until now to show some improvement, and though we all persuaded her to relax, and that everything would turn out alright, it is still difficult for xiao Qi not to worry.”

“Just what...illness does Brother Qingyao really have? I remember he looked fine one day, and then the next day, I heard he was seriously ill.”

“The physician said it was a stagnation of the blood, and that he would recover with careful rest.”

Yan Yujin looked at him deeply, and spat out three words. “You believe that?”

Xiao Jingrui stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“A stagnation of the blood...” Yan Yujin smiled to himself. “I have also visited Brother Qingyao a few times, and to tell the truth, you are the only one who hasn’t gotten suspicious.....”

“He is my own brother, what is there to be suspicious about? Should I suspect Qingyao of faking his illness?”

Yan Yujin looked at him impatiently and went straight to the point, saying crisply, “Jingrui, that’s not an illness, it’s an injury!”

Chapter 78: Brothers

“Injury?” Xiao Jingrui was shocked. “How did Qingyao dage get an injury?”

“You ask me, who am I supposed to ask?”

“Weren’t you just acting like you knew everything?”

“How could I know everything, if there were really people on this earth who knew everything, that would be the Master of Langya Hall and that Brother Su of ours.....” Yan Yujin rolled his eyes, “Ai, let’s go ask Brother Su, perhaps he really will know how Brother Qingyao got injured.....”

“Tsk,” Xiao Jingrui rolled his eyes. “What proof do you have that Qingyao dage is injured? He is a jianghu man, there’s no shame in being injured, so why would he pretend to be sick and lie to everyone?”

“Not necessarily.....what if he was doing something he shouldn’t have been doing when he got injured?”

“Yujin!” Xiao Jingrui’s face darkened. “What do you mean by that? My Qingyao dage is chivalrous and heroic, what shameful thing could he be a part of?”

“Why are you so angry?” Yan Yujin glared at him. “When I was young, I teased a girl once and you said I’d done something terribly shameful, and you’ve kept saying that all these years, but have I ever gotten angry?”

“You...I.....” Xiao Jingrui didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “I was just joking!”

“Then how do you know I’m not joking?”

Xiao Jingrui gave up dealing with this person and only shrugged, softening his tone as he said, “Yujin, never joke about my dage like that again.....”

“Alright, alright,” Yan Yujin waved a hand and knocked over the cups on the table, and was just about to say something when a call was suddenly heard from the direction of the main road.

“Boss, two cups of tea, please.”

“Right-o!” The owner of the tea house filled two cups and brought them over to a plain-looking carriage stopped at the side of the road. A hand reached out from the window and drew the curtain aside slightly to accept the tea, then a moment later, the empty cups and some money were handed back through the curtain and the carriage immediately departed, heading in the direction of the city.

Yan Yujin clutched his cup, forgetting to drink as he gazed dazedly after the carriage.

“What it is?” Xiao Jingrui took the cup from his hands and set it down, worried he would spill it over himself. “Was there something strange about that carriage?”

“Just now.....just now, when the curtain was drawn aside, I saw that behind the person who wanted the tea...there sat another person.....”

If Xie Bi had been sitting there, he would have immediately retorted, “What’s so strange about people sitting in a carriage? Did you expect to see dogs inside instead?” But it was Xiao Jingrui sitting there beside him, and so there was only a gentle inquiry, “Who was it?”

“I don’t know if my eyes were mistaken.....” Yan Yujin grasped his friend by the arm. “It was He Wenxin!”

“How is that possible?” Xiao Jingrui stared back at him. “He Wenxin is about to be executed in the Spring Execution, he should be in the prisons, how could he be going in and out of the city?”

“That’s why I thought I was wrong.....could it be someone who looks like him?”

“Maybe, there are so many people in this world, there must be some who look similar.”

“Never mind, perhaps it really was just a trick of the light.....” Yan Yujin stood and shook out his sleeves. “We’ve rested long enough, let’s go.”

Xiao Jingrui paid for their tea and picked up his little box, and the two joined the crowds heading for the city, appearing relaxed and at ease, and as they passed by a stall selling fruits and candies, Xiao Jingrui casually picked up a potful, and no one knew why he was buying so many of these ordinary snacks. As they neared the gates of the city, there was a larger crowd, likely because of the routine inspections at the gates, but the flow of people still managed to enter the city in a reasonably calm manner. The guards at the city gates belonged to the Capital Patrol, and the Capital Patrol was controlled by the Marquis of Ning, and when they saw the First Young Master of their Marquis’ household, they all bowed in greeting. Xiao Jingrui had never carried arrogant airs, and he only smiled and nodded, handing over the food in his hands to their leader and instructing him to “share these snacks with your brothers after the shift is over” before passing through the gates with Yan Yujin.

“So it turns out you bought those for them....” The son of the Imperial Uncle laughed and nudged his friend with his elbow. “People who don’t know you will say you know how to suck up to people, but in fact, you just have a kind heart.”

“You forget, when we left the city this morning, it was already these seven uncles standing there at the gates, and he mentioned that the fruits and candies outside the city are very good and told us to try some. I just brought him some since we were passing by anyway, what does that have to do with a kind heart?”

“I did forget.” Yan Yujin gave an exaggerated sigh. “Oh Jingrui, you are so considerate, whoever marries you in the future will certainly be lucky indeed.”

“Shut up,” Xiao Jingrui laughed as he shoved him. As they tussled, a pair of riders suddenly thundered down the road, and the two friends hurried to one side, looking after the horses with a frown. “Why is the Ministry of Justice in such a hurry?”

“The day after tomorrow is the Spring Execution, the platform for the execution was built yesterday outside the market at the eastern part of the city, and a guard was set up around the area yesterday. Those two must have been hurrying over for the change in shift.” Yan Yujin looked at the smoke in the distance. “I guess.....the Earl of Wen will come to watch the execution....”

“His son was murdered, it’s natural for him to be so involved.” Xiao Jingrui shook his head and sighed, “If that He Wenxin wasn’t so arrogant all the time, he would not have committed a crime like this murder.....but no matter what, he deserves the punishment he has been given.”

Yan Yujin narrowed his eyes, seeming to be in deep thought, but did not say anything else. The two split up at the door to the Yan manor, and when Xiao Jingrui arrived home, he only stopped in his rooms to change before going over to the western courtyard where the Zhuo family was staying.

Zhuo Dingfeng was not there, and in the courtyard, Mistress Zhuo and the heavily pregnant Xie Qi were sitting under the cherry blossoms amidst a pile of needlework, but when she saw Xiao Jingrui come in, Mistress Zhuo immediately put down the embroidery in her hands and beckoned her son over to her side.

“Mum, how are you today?” Xiao Jingrui greeted her, straightening immediately. Compared to the reserved and cooler Grand Princess Liyang, the mistress of the Zhuo family was even more motherly, and had always doted on Jingrui even more than Qingyao, and now she took his hand and asked gently, “Did you have fun today? Are you hungry? Do you want some pastries?”

“Rui ge really is Mum’s favourite,” Xie Qi couldn’t hold back her

smile. “You are the eldest son of the Xie family, but the youngest son of Mum here. Go ahead and act as spoiled as you like then, just pretend your sister-in-law isn’t sitting over here.”

Xiao Jingrui couldn’t help laughing too. “To tell you the truth, although you have been married for a few years now, I still see you as my little sister, not as my older sister-in-law. Here, I brought you these, see if you like them.”

Xie Qi tore open the wrapping and took out the group of twelve little clay dolls, arranging them on the table, an expression of delight on her face. “They are so cute, thank you, Rui ge.”

“In the future, Qi mei will have this many adorable little babies too....”

“Rui ge, please, there are twelve here, if I give birth to so many, I’ll become like those.....” Although Xie Qi was a bright and lively girl, she couldn’t help trailing off and blushing as she giggled.

“That’s right, where’s Qingyi mei?”

“She went out.”

“Oh?”

“What, only you’re allowed to have outings, other people can’t go out? Bi ge went with her, don’t worry.”

“But when I tried to invite Second Brother this morning, he said he had something to do, and couldn’t come with me?”

Xie Qi laughed. “He just didn’t want to go with you, pay attention, will you?”

“Rui’er is honest, why are you laughing at him?” Mistress Zhuo hurriedly intervened, and brushed Xiao Jingrui’s forehead as she continued, “When are you going to bring back a pretty little girl for your mum, then, eh?”

“Mum.....” Xiao Jingrui cast about frantically for a change of topic. “How is Qingyao dage’s illness today? Qi mei looks so

relaxed, I guess he must be doing better?”

“Much better. He had some medicine at noon and went back to sleep, he’ll probably be awake by now, you can go and see.”

Xiao Jingrui seized the opportunity and escaped to the house, the sound of Xie Qi’s laughter drifting after him.

Zhuo Qingyao and his wife lived in the eastern cottage, which held a bedroom and a living room, and the fragrance of herbal medicine still lingered in the air. Because the windows were all shut, it was a little dim, but this was no difficulty for Xiao Jingrui, who had exceedingly good vision, and as soon as he walked in, he saw that the patient on the bed was sitting up, his eyes open.

“Dage, you’re awake?” Xiao Jingrui hurried over to help him sit, putting a cushion behind him for support.

“You were all laughing so happily outside, I woke up a while ago.” Zhuo Qingyao’s smile was a little weak, but he was looking much better, and Xiao Jingrui went over and opened a few of the windows, letting in some air, then returned to sit by the side of the bed, asking concernedly, “Dage, are you feeling better?”

“I can already get up and move about, but Mum and Xiao Qi are making me stay in bed.”

“They’re just worried about you.” Xiao Jingrui saw that Zhuo Qingyao seemed to be favouring his waist as he moved, and as Yan Yujin’s words flashed across his mind, his face fell a little.

“What is it?” Zhuo Qingyao put a hand on his shoulder and asked in a low voice, “Did something bad happen when you were out?”

“No.....” Xiao Jingrui forced a smile and was quiet for a moment, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Dage, have you fought with anyone since you came to the capital?”

“No,” Although Zhuo Qingyao answered immediately, something seemed to flash across his gaze. “Why do you ask?”

“Then.....” Xiao Jingrui hesitated for a moment, then suddenly gritted his teeth and said, “then how were you injured?”

His question was so blunt that Zhuo Qingyao was taken aback, and after a long moment, he sighed and said, “You’ve realized I’m injured? Well, don’t tell Mum or xiao Qi, I’ll be fine with a little rest.”

“Did my dad ask you to do something?” Xiao Jingrui asked, gripping Zhuo Qingyao’s hand tightly.

“Jingrui, don’t worry so much, Father-in-law is doing all of this for the country and for the people.....”

Xiao Jingrui stared dazedly at his dage, feeling a chill in his heart. Just what kind of a thing was this fight for the throne, that it could drive people so crazy and suck the family and friends he cared so much about so far into its depths? His father, Xie Bi, Brother Su, dage.....and after all this fighting, what would they obtain in the end?

Qi mei was about to give birth, but his father had sent his own son-in-law out into danger, and when he came back injured, he hadn’t even dared tell his own family the truth, so how could it have been anything honourable? For the country and for the people – could such sober words really be used to describe the current situation?

“Jingrui, are you letting your thoughts get carried away again?” Zhuo Qingyao gently patted his little brother on the cheek. “It is because you have always been kind and generous of heart, and because Mum and Mother-in-law always favoured you, that Father-in-law has never thought to discuss the great things he has planned with you. Prince Yu, in his confusion, is coveting the highest position, and as the Pillar of the Court, how could Father-in-law stand aside and not share the burdens of his lord? You have grown up, and your scholarly and martial abilities are both outstanding, so sometimes, you will have to take the initiative to

give Father-in-law a little help.”

Xiao Jingrui’s mouth tightened, his gaze growing unusually guarded. He was kind and generous, it was true, but he was not totally unaware of his father’s intentions and the situation in the court. Hearing Qingyao’s words, he knew that he, and even his Zhuo dad, had already been completely taken in by his Xie dad, and that it would be useless to try to convince him otherwise. The only thing he did not know was what it was that Qingyao dage had taken such a great risk to accomplish.....

“Dage, your Tianquan swordsmanship is far superior to mine, and few in jianghu are your match, so what kind of a person was it who managed to injure you so badly?”

Zhuo Qingyao sighed. “I’m ashamed to say, although I lost to him, I didn’t even get a good look at his face....”

“Then where was it that dage received this injury?”

Zhuo Qingyao’s brows furrowed and he shook his head. “Father-in-law ordered me not to tell you certain things.....I hear you are close with that Chief Mei of Jiangzuo?”

Xiao Jingrui muttered to himself and nodded, “Yes.”

“That Chief Mei is truly a remarkable talent, Father-in-law originally thought that he could become a strong support for the Crown Prince, but who could have predicted that this person would be such a poor judge of character, and actually choose Prince Yu instead.....Jingrui, I know he has taken care of you in the past, and you are a person who remembers kindnesses done to you, so of course you have a close relationship with him now, but you must also remember and keep in your heart the righteousness and justice of the court.”

Xiao Jingrui couldn’t stop himself. “Dage, do you really agree with the things the Crown Prince is doing....”

“Do not speak nonsense, servants do not discuss the actions of

their lords. Father-in-law has already told me, in the matter of the illegal fireworks factory, the Crown Prince was framed.”

Xiao Jingrui knew that his father valued traditional ideas of chivalry and loyalty, and that it would be exceedingly difficult to change his mind once he had made his decision. As he was still injured, he did not want to anger him, and so he only lowered his head and answered quietly, “Yes.”

Chapter 79: A Situation at the Gallows

As the two brothers talked, the door to the outer courtyard opened and Xie Qi came in slowly, so they immediately changed the topic, turning the conversation lightly to idle matters instead. When it was time for dinner, Mistress Zhuo came and led Xiao Jingrui away to the dining room, while Zhuo Qingyao and his wife stayed in their own rooms to eat, because it was still difficult for him to move about.

By this time, Xie Bi and Zhuo Qingyi had arrived home, but Xie Yu and Zhuo Dingfeng were still not back, though no one knew why, and they had only sent word saying not to wait for them, and so at dinner, the only elders in the room were the two mothers, and the atmosphere was even more casual than usual.

Xiao Jingrui was the child most doted on by both mothers, and this became obvious at the dinner table, especially with Mistress Zhuo, who always made sure to keep his bowl filled with his favourite foods. Xie Bi, sitting to one side, grumbled teasingly, “Xie Xu and I are here too, can anyone see us?”

Grand Princess Liyang, always reserved, only looked at him and smiled, but Mistress Zhuo swiftly dropped a chicken leg into his bowl, smiling as she said, “Alright, here’s yours, eat up then. Don’t you young people usually eat like wolves?”

Xiao Jingrui considerately put some food into the bowl of his Third Brother, who had lowered his head and was eating silently, as he turned with a smile to Xie Bi and said, “You are going to be my mum’s son-in-law, so you will soon be much more precious than I – fathers and mothers always favour their sons-in-law over their own sons, just like how Mother always favours Qingyao over me.”

For purposes of differentiation, when everyone was together, Xiao Jingrui always called Mistress Zhuo “mum”, and Grand

Princess Liyang “mother”, and at his words, Grand Princess Liyang laughed in spite of herself and said, “Qingyao has always been more sensible than you, of course I must favour him more.”

Xie Bi was about to speak, but was kicked subtly by a blushing Zhuo Qingyi, and so he changed the topic, talking about the things they had seen on their outing today, and the room filled with warmth and happiness as the conversation went on.

The quietest person at dinner was Xie Xu, his cool and haughty manner taking after his mother, Grand Princess Liyang. He was meticulous and attentive to detail in everything he did, and even at meals, he concentrated on eating and never spoke much. After dinner, he sat quietly keeping them company for a while, and then bowed to his elders and bade his older siblings a good evening before returning to his room to study, so that even the normally steady and unexcitable Xiao Jingrui wanted to call Yan Yujin over and bring him into Xie Xu’s rooms to stir up a bit of trouble.

“Xu’er is so young, and already keeps such orderly habits,” Mistress Zhuo praised to Grand Princess Liyang, “he will certainly be a great talent in the future.”

The Grand Princess smiled, but there was a hint of sadness in her gaze as she said quietly, “Xu’er loves his studies, but he has always thought too highly of himself, and has not yet realized that there are many people in this world more talented than he, so I fear he will have a hard lesson to learn one day.”

Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi both thought of the little lesson Xie Xu had already received at the Su manor, and their eyes met, but both silently agreed not to mention it. They sat there talking until the second watch of the night, but Marquis Xie and Zhuo Dingfeng had still not returned to the manor. Xiao Jingrui, worried, escorted his mothers back to their rooms and then immediately ordered for a horse, instructing Xie Bi to wait at home while he prepared to go out to look for them. Just as he was about to ride out the main door, his two fathers returned.

“Why are you wearing your cloak? Are you going out at this time of night?” Xie Yu asked with his eyebrows raised, his tone a little stern.

Xie Bi, who had come to see Xiao Jingrui out, hurriedly explained, “Dage was worried because Father and Uncle Zhuo still hadn’t come back, and wanted to go out to look for you.....”

“What’s there to look for? Even if something had really happened to us, what could a child like you do to help?”

“Jingrui is a filial son, Brother Xie, don’t be too harsh on him.” Compared to Xie Yu’s sternness, Zhuo Dingfeng always treated the children with affection, and he patted Xiao Jingrui on the shoulder and said warmly, “Thank you for worrying. It’s late, go to bed.”

Xie Yu appeared to be in a good mood tonight, and he actually smiled as he said, “Brother Zhuo, you always spoil the children.”

Ever since the Crown Prince’s troubles recently, Xie Yu practically never smiled at home anymore, so Xiao Jingrui and Xie Bi were both astonished, wondering what had happened to make him so happy but not daring to ask, and so they could only make silent guesses as they bowed and left quietly.

Early the next morning, the Third Young Master Xie Xu left to return to Songshan Academy. In the afternoon, Grand Princess Liyang decided to return to her Princess’ residence to attend to her greenhouses, and all the women in the manor aside from Xie Qi went along with her. Xie Bi was detained by his work in the manor, and so there was only Xiao Jingrui to accompany them as escort. The greenhouses were bursting with spring flowers – winter daphnes, white Yulan magnolias, jaspers, cherry blossoms, lilacs, azaleas, Chinese redbuds, and cherry-apples all in full bloom. Everyone felt that one day was not enough to admire the beauty of all the spring flora, and so they stayed the night in the Princess’ residence, and spent a second day enjoying the scenery, so that it was almost evening by the time they returned to the manor on the

second day.

Because they had spent two entire days amusing themselves, the women were all tired, and Xiao Jingrui only escorted them to the door of the inner courtyard before retiring himself. He went first to the western courtyard to visit Zhuo Qingyao, and then returned to his own rooms, preparing to spend the evening reading quietly.

Who could have predicted that, after only a couple of pages, a familiar voice drifted in from the courtyard, calling his name, sounding very excited.

Xiao Jingrui smiled ruefully and put down his book, then went to the door and invited his friend in, asking, "What's the news? Come in and sit down before you speak."

Yan Yujin couldn't wait to sit, grabbing Xiao Jingrui by the arm and blurting out, "I wasn't mistaken!"

"Wasn't mistaken about what?"

"The day before yesterday, when we saw that carriage outside the city, the person inside was He Wenxin, I wasn't mistaken!"

"Oh?" Xiao Jingrui stared at him. "That means he escaped from prison?But wait, if he escaped from prison, why would he be heading back towards the capital?"

"He did escape, but he escaped before the new year, so that day when we saw him, he had been caught and was being taken back to the city!"

"Escaped before the new year? But we never heard any news, and the Ministry of Justice didn't put out any notices for capture...."

"The Ministry of Justice let him out themselves, of course they didn't send out notices!" Yan Yujin picked up Xiao Jingrui's cup of tea and drained it. "Let me tell you, He Wenxin's father, He Jingzhong, conspired with Qi Min of the Ministry of Justice, and found a substitute who looked like He Wenxin and exchanged him for the real He Wenxin, and then hid him far away. Once the

Spring Execution arrived, the substitute was to be killed and buried, and all evidence buried with him, and that rascal was going to live out his life under a new identity far away from the capital!”

“That’s not possible, is it?” Xiao Jingrui’s eyes were wide with shock. “That.....that is too treacherous.....”

“It does sound extremely reckless, but that Ministry of Justice really did it, and now that you mention it, this Qi Min is really something, I wonder whether he came up with this idea all by himself....”

Xiao Jingrui was puzzling over something, and he crossed his arms as he asked, “Yujin.....this all sounds like a very well-hidden secret, how do you know about it?”

“It’s not just me, the whole city knows about this by now!” Yan Yujin gave him a look. “The Spring Execution today unfolded like a play, but you always hide away at home so of course you don’t know anything.”

“You went to the market to watch the Spring Execution?”

“I.....I didn’t go either.....what’s there to see about people being killed.....” Yan Yujin scratched his head, embarrassed. “But my friend went, and he saw the entire thing from start to finish so he told me the whole story.....do you want to hear it or not?”

“Yes, something as important as this, of course I do.”

Yan Yujin’s spirits immediately lifted, his smile widening with delight as he said excitedly, “They say that there was a massive crowd at the market, and the Ministry of Justice had deployed every man under its command. The supervising official was Qi Min, of course, and he sat on the lookout tower facing the platform, handing down the red-inked names one by one, and every time a sheet of paper with a name fell to the ground, a criminal’s head struck the ground as well. So they kept cutting and cutting, and then it was He Wenxin’s turn, and after they verified

his identity, Qi Min was about to hand over the blood signature when your dad suddenly shouted, ‘Hold!’”

“Who did you say?” Xiao Jingrui jumped in shock. “My dad?”

“Yes, your dad, Marquis Xie. He was also on the lookout tower, and after he shouted for the executor to stop, he asked Qi Min, “Minister Qi, human life is beyond value, are you sure beyond a doubt that this person is the criminal?” Yan Yujim imitated Xie Yu’s manner, copying him with about seven to eight parts accuracy. “As soon as he asked this, Qi Min’s face paled, but the arrow had been strung and he had no way to turn back, so he could only grit his teeth and declare that he was certain there was no mistake, and shout for the executor to hurry and do his job. Your dad then shouted out, ‘Hold your sword,’ and at that moment, a carriage was escorted to the side of the platform by the Capital Patrol, and several of the soldiers dragged out a person from the carriage, can you guess who it was?”

Xiao Jingrui said, “He Wenxin.”

“That’s right! It was the real He Wenxin. But his father and Qi Min both refused to admit it was him, and insisted that this one was the fake. Your dad just laughed and brought out three more people – the head jailer, the middleman for the substitute, and a woman. The woman started to scream and cry, and then the fake He Wenxin on the platform couldn’t stand it any more and suddenly screamed out that he was not the convicted criminal, and that he didn’t want to die..... Imagine it, the place was filled to bursting with spectators, and all of a sudden, the scene was descending into chaos, and Qi Min looking like he was about to faint. The Earl of Wen also came to watch the execution, and when he saw what the Ministry of Justice had done, he was nearly jumping up and down in fury. He grabbed onto He Jingzhong and Qi Min and refused to let them go, shouting about taking them to see the Emperor. In the end, it was your dad who sent in the Capital Patrol to take control of the scene and prevented it from

deteriorating. Later, all the ministers went into the palace, and they're probably waiting outside Taihe Hall to see the Emperor right now."

This was truly a tale he had never heard before, and Xiao Jingrui sat in a daze for a few long moments before asking, "Do you really think Minister He and the Ministry of Justice came up with this plot to substitute a criminal on death row?"

"I think it's true." Yan Yujin lowered his voice. "Your dad is such a cautious person, without iron-clad evidence, the most he would do would be to present this to the Emperor in confidence, he would not have acted so publicly before such an audience. For the Ministry of Appointments, probably only He Jingzhong will lose his position, but the Ministry of Justice is another story....."

"That's true, if other similar cases are discovered in the ensuing investigation, Minister Qi's crime and sentence will be even heavier," Xiao Jingrui murmured. Suddenly, he remembered how happy his father had been two nights ago. Looking back now, that must have been because they had caught He Wenxin.....the Ministries of Appointments and Justice supported Prince Yu, and so this prince who had had so much success recently had received two heavy blows with this one case, and it would likely take him a while to recover.....

"These heads of departments are really so despicable," Yan Yujin shook his head and sighed. "When did the ministers of the court descend so low? With people like this helping the lords rule the kingdom, can the kingdom really be ruled well?"

Xiao Jingrui lowered his head in deep thought, then suddenly said, "Can you blame the court officials? The root of the problem lies in the lords – if the source is pure, the waters will flow clear, but if the source is corrupted, then the waters will be turbid. In this court, anyone who treats others with sincerity is called naive, and anyone who doesn't play the game of strategy is seen as childish. With an atmosphere like this, what else can they do?"

At his words, Yan Yujin gaped at him open-mouthed, before finally replying, “You’re full of surprises. I always thought you never paid attention to court politics, but then you come out with something like that. Let me offer you a bow to show my respect and admiration.”

“Quit teasing me,” Xiao Jingrui glared at him. “Those words were not said by me, it is only that I keep thinking.....he was right.....”

“Who?” Yan Yujin thought for a moment, then asked hesitatingly, “Brother Su?”

“Ng. We travelled thousands of miles together, there was nothing we did not discuss on the road. This is something he said to me late one night by candlelight, after Xie Bi had gone to sleep.....I just don’t understand, if Brother Su has such values and principles, why did he choose Prince Yu?”

“He probably didn’t have much choice?” Yan Yujin shrugged. “Is there much difference between Prince Yu and the Crown Prince?”

Xiao Jingrui nodded, looking a little helpless. “Brother Su once said, when you establish a monarch, you establish a set of morals, and virtuous monarchs and upright ministers are the blessing and fortune of a kingdom. Treat your people with kindness and your ministers with courtesy. Monarchs who are always jealous and suspicious, and who act harshly and mercilessly to their subordinates will never be remembered as worthy rulers by the generations to come. I think Brother Su’s struggle lies in not being able to support a lord with values and morals he can respect.....”

Yan Yujin’s gaze flashed and he looked as if he was about to speak, but in the end, he only tapped his fingers against the cover of the teapot on the table, fiddling with it idly, and then suddenly stood up, throwing their previous conversation to the winds as he said abruptly, “Jingrui, the moon is beautiful tonight, come with me to Miaoyin House?”

Chapter 80: Touring the Manor

The Emperor's edict regarding the case of the 'switched convicts' was officially released ten days later. The Minister of Appointments, He Jingzhong, was relieved of his position, and, for the plots he had conceived for his son's sake, would be demoted to a minor government post in Yue province, while He Wenxin would be executed according to the law. The Minister of Justice, Qi Min, had acted with total disregard for the lives of the people, failing in his duty and circumventing the law, and so would be imprisoned and sentenced to exile. Other officials of the Ministry of Justice, both high ranked and low, were likewise found guilty of the same crime. Although Prince Yu was not implicated, these were the only two among the Six Departments of the court which he held comfortably in the palm of his hand, and which accomplished whatever he asked of them, and with this one case, he had lost both Ministers all at once, and so, besides feeling regret and sorrow, his hatred for Xie Yu burned even hotter, seeming to sink into his very bones.

Someone analyzed the respective losses of the two camps in the fight for the crown in the past half year, and realized that, although it seemed as if the Crown Prince had suffered repeated blows recently while Prince Yu wandered around in high spirits, with this last case, there was, in the end, not much difference between the losses experienced by each side.

On the Crown Prince's side, his mother consort had been demoted, he had lost the court debate, he had been stripped of the Minister of Rites and the Minister of Revenue, and he himself had been confined to Guijia Palace. On Prince Yu's side, the land infringement case had toppled the Duke of Qing, the Empress was receiving the cold shoulder in the palace, and now, he had lost the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Appointments. Everyone said it was normal to win some and lose some, but the strange

thing was, these two fought like wildfire, attacking each other endlessly, but no one could see what they had gained, and at most, you could only say Prince Yu had improved his relationship a little with the imperial Mu residence and with Prince Jing.

But at the moment, the Crown Prince and Prince Yu did not have time to sit down and count their gains and losses. They were currently investing all their energy into one single matter, and that was how to place their own people into the vacancies in the Ministries of Justice and Appointments, as neither could afford to allow the other to place his own people into the open positions.

The Crown Prince was currently confined in Guijia palace for reflection and did not dare interfere directly in this matter, so he could only act through other people, and inevitably, he was only at about seventy percent of his usual strength. Prince Yu, on the other hand, had hand-picked the two previous Ministers who had just been dismissed, and so the Emperor was currently rather unimpressed with his judgement, and naturally, Prince Yu was not in a position to receive anything he asked for, as he had done in the past. And so, although the two struggled day and night, no conclusion could be reached.

The Ministry of Appointments had only lost a minister, and the operations of the ministry itself were not disrupted, but the Ministry of Justice had lost half its people all at once, and if a head was not appointed soon, the situation would disintegrate into chaos. The Emperor was greatly troubled over this problem, and at his age, headaches and dizziness naturally accompanied stresses of the mind and heart, and soon, all the princes and princesses were arriving at the palace to inquire about his health. Prince Jing and Princess Jingning came together, and when the matter which was causing the Emperor so much trouble was brought up, Prince Jing casually mentioned the official from the Ministry of Justice he had worked with while handling the land infringement case, Cai Quan. At this reminder, the Emperor suddenly remembered this person

had been in charge of writing the report for the case, and had left a very good impression on him, and after a hurried investigation, it was confirmed that he had not been implicated in the case of the exchanged convicts, and so the Emperor immediately summoned him to court. After interviewing him for an hour, he saw that Cai Quan possessed clarity of thought and a thorough knowledge of criminal law, displaying good insight while answering his questions, and was indeed a rare talent. It was only that he did not have much qualifications or experience, and did not come from any notable background, and so he had never risen in the ranks. The Emperor had found his solution. The next day, Cai Quan was raised to a third-ranked official and appointed temporary Minister, and was ordered to take charge of all necessary efforts to resume the normal operations of the Ministry of Justice within a month, and to clear up the backlog of work that had accumulated in the meantime. The bickering Crown Prince and Prince Yu had no idea where this Cai Quan had come from, and both initially thought he was from the other's camp, and could not believe their ears when their investigations revealed that this person truly did not belong to any party, and had remained neutral.

After stabilizing the Ministry of Justice, the Emperor turned his attention to the choice of the new Minister of Appointments, and after many days of consideration, he finally accepted the suggestion of Head Secretariat Liu Cheng and transferred former Imperial Censor Shi Yuanqing into the post, whose mourning period for a parent had ended half a year ago, but who had not been able to return to his former position yet. Shi Yuanqing was an observant and meticulous man, and was known for being honest and upright, and so he had butted heads with both the Crown Prince and Prince Yu in the past, and had even contradicted the Emperor before, and so the Emperor was not very fond of him. No one knew what Head Secretariat Liu Cheng had said to convince the Emperor this time, to make him put aside his personal preference in appointing this important office.

But the frenzy of the court did not disturb the peace and quiet of Mei Changsu's manor. Although he was now publicly recognized as Prince Yu's strategist, the losses Prince Yu had experienced in the case of the 'switched convicts' was entirely due to his own carelessness and underestimation of his enemy, and as he had not mentioned the matter to the qilin prodigy beforehand, naturally, he could not hold him responsible after the fact. As for the fight to seize the two Ministers' positions, Prince Yu had actually come to seek Mei Changsu's advice, but in the end, he was from the jianghu world, and did not have people in the court he could use, and so he could only analyze and suggest a few appropriate choices, and could give no practical help this time. Fortunately, Prince Yu had not placed high expectations on him in this matter, and so after listening to his views, he returned hurriedly to his palace to continue working.

As a result, in these warming spring days, Mei Changsu turned all his attention onto one task, which was to bring in artisans and smiths to renovate the Su manor's gardens.

The blueprint of the new gardens had been designed by Mei Changsu's own hand, and the landscape was covered with plants matched in height and size, complemented with fountains and stone gardens, a new large lily pond, a bridge, and even a small pavilion, and there were to be a dozen huge, ancient trees brought in, as well as flowers according to every season. The progress of the reconstruction was exceedingly quick, and the entire process took only a month from start to finish.

On the second day after Su Manor completed its renovations, Mei Changsu good-naturedly invited some guests from the capital with whom he had had previous relations to see the new gardens, and at his special invitation, the two Xie brothers attended with Zhuo Qingyao and Zhuo Qingyi, the Mu siblings came with a few high-ranking generals of their own manor, Meng Zhi brought his wife, and Xia Dong even dragged along Xia Chun, who had only just

returned to the capital. Although Yan Yujin did not bring anyone with him, he brought an exquisite little canoe, and Fei Liu spent the entire day in it, floating rapturously on the lily pond.

With the host's warm reception, the atmosphere quickly became joyful and lively. All the guests were of no ordinary background, and more importantly, there was a whole chaotic mess of different positions and views, and everyone had some relationship with everyone else, and so, on the contrary, they all veered away from court topics and found casual subjects to chat about instead, and as a result, there was a rare ease and comfort to the whole environment. Among this crowd, Yan Yujin was the first to create excitement, and Mu Qing was of a similar temperament, and the two were matched like peas in a pod. As for the others, Zhuo Qingyao was famed for his jianghu reputation, the Xuanjing officers were experienced in the ways of the world, Princess Nihuang was a legend in her own right, and host Mei Changsu was an even greater mystery.....no one could have thought that there could be so much joy and delight in such a strange combination of people.

After touring the gardens, lunch was laid out on a half-open terrace. The dishes were simple and light, but the most curious part was that each dish was accompanied by a different type of wine, and wine and dish together combined to give a most distinctive flavour. Amongst the guests, only Xie Bi, who was fond of tasting wine, could name most of the vintages present, while the others only knew one or two at most.

After the meal, Mei Changsu ordered for tea to be brought and personally brewed a pot, and after everyone had received a cup, he said with a gentle smile, "It is dull to sit around like this, I thought of a game last night, I wonder if anyone would be interested?"

No one would turn down the chance to hear about a game thought up by Mister Mei of Jiangzuo, even if he or she did not want to play, and Yan Yujin was the first to reply, "Good, good,

Brother Su, tell us about it.”

“I once had the good fortune to acquire a bamboo scroll of zither music, and after studying it for a long time, I was able to ascertain that it was a score of the long-lost ‘The Scattering of Guangling’. Last night, I hid this score in a certain place in this manor, and I will give this score as a gift to whoever finds it first.” As Mei Changsu spoke, he rolled the cup in his hand, gently dissipating its fragrance. “As for those guests who have no interest in the treasure hunt, let me keep you company here with tea and conversation, and we will wait to see who will claim the prize today.”

As soon as he heard the words, ‘The Scattering of Guangling’, Yan Yujin’s eyes lit up, the little Lord Mu was young and liked to play, and so he looked excited as well, and although Xie Bi was not interested in the music score, he thought going off on a treasure hunt would be more fun than sitting around drinking tea, and so these three were the first to stand. Xiao Jingrui originally didn’t have much preference either way, but as he hesitated, Yan Yujin suddenly turned a glare towards him, and he knew his friend figured adding another person to the team would increase their chances of winning, so he smiled and put down his teacup, then got to his feet, pulling Zhuo Qingyao up with him. Zhuo Qingyi looked interested, but as a well-bred young noble lady, she was embarrassed to join in the excitement, and so sat unmoving at her place, blushing and glancing furtively at Princess Nihuang.

The Princess, exceptionally observant as always, took one look at her and knew what she was thinking, and so she smiled and stood, saying, “Miss Zhuo, would you care to accompany me?”

Zhuo Qingyi struggled to contain the joy on her face as she hurriedly stood and curtsied, saying, “It would be my honour to accept the Princess’ invitation.”

Seeing the Princess and little lord walking away, the generals of the imperial Mu residence stopped trying to contain their own eagerness, and immediately got up and followed. And so, with only

this bit of effort, the terrace was almost cleared.

Mei Changsu spun his tea cup with the tip of his fingers and smiled, "It looks like the only ones willing to sit around with me drinking tea are Meng dage, Meng dasau, and Officer Xia Dong...."

"How can that be, there's still Officer Xia Chun..." Meng Zhi turned towards the eastern part of the terrace as he spoke, and stopped, taken aback. "Where's Officer Xia Chun?"

"He left a long time ago," Xia Dong couldn't help laughing. "Brother Chun is obsessed with music, so as soon as he heard there was an ancient zither score, how could he sit around? Before Mister Su had even finished speaking, he had disappeared like a gust of wind.....poof...."

"Right, right, right," Meng Zhi smacked his head with his hand. "I forgot, last time, Officer Xia Chun even got into an argument with His Majesty over a piece of ancient music."

"Officer Xia Chun is an expert in the arts of divination, and possesses such ingenuity and skill, he will see through my little camouflaging at a glance, so it looks like Yujin is going to be disappointed today," Mei Changsu smiled.

"It's difficult to say, Mister Su's manor is not small, and whether one starts out in the right direction really depends on luck." Xia Dong raised an eyebrow, a gleam in her eyes as she laughed evilly, "Yujin that little rascal dragged along so many helpers that, if anyone besides Brother Chun finds the ancient score, he'll find a way to weasel it out of them in the end. So if you look at it like this, his chance of success is not low."

Mei Changsu smiled but did no reply, lowering his head to tend the teapot and refilling everyone's cups with fresh tea, idly turning the conversation to the popular sights and scenery of the area. Around two or three hours later, Xia Chun returned, his face as bright as the spring wind, befitting his name, and holding a small, red wooden box in his hands. He strode up to Mei Changsu and

clasped his hands in a bow, saying, "Mister Su, I am flattered by your generous gift."

Mei Changsu laughed brightly, and said, "Officer Xia has found it yourself, what does this have to do with me? What about the others? They're not still looking, are they?"

"Yes," Xia Chun's smile was a little mischievous, "I came back quietly."

"I had not expected Officer Xia Chun to have such a playful spirit," Mei Changsu smiled in spite of himself, then turned his head to look towards the left side of the terrace.

Li Gang had been standing there waiting for some time, and seeing the Chief's gaze turn towards him, he silently raised his right eyebrow, and then bent forward in a bow.

Mei Changsu's heart steadied, and he said aloud, "Go and ask the Princess and the rest of them to return, even if they keep looking, there won't be a second scroll."

"Yes." Not long after Li Gang received the order and retreated, the other treasure-hunters came trailing back. When Yan Yujin saw the zither music score in Xia Chun's hands, although he was disappointed, he also knew that this person's fanatic love of music surpassed even his own, and so he only sighed a few times and quickly put the matter aside.

The sun was setting, and both host and guests had exhausted their pleasure. The guests took their leaves one by one. Meng Zhi was the last to go, and though he usually rode, he stepped into a carriage this time, probably because he was escorting his wife, and they left that way.

Mei Changsu stood at the door of his manor, seeing his guests out, and then strode slowly to the back of his manor towards his private rooms, and as soon as he entered the door of his house, he said smiling, "Meng dage, you returned quickly."

“I didn’t go far,” Meng Zhi came over and helped him close the door, then turned and raised an eyebrow. “Did you forget Xia Chun was here when you played that game today? You really scared me just now, I was sweating all over, he’s an expert at mechanics and traps, and you actually dared to let him roam around freely in your manor.....”

“This game was designed for Xia Chun.” As he spoke, a hint of a smile drifted across Mei Changsu’s lips. “A secret tunnel that even Xia Chun couldn’t find – that is truly a secret tunnel.....and besides, I redesigned the entrance to the secret tunnel myself, so even if Xia Chun had discovered it, he would only see it as a hidden room. And anyway, if I didn’t have seven parts confidence of beating him, I would not have taken this risk.”

“You’re right,” Meng Zhi let out a long breath. “In everything you do, when have you ever failed to be thorough?”

Mei Changsu smiled and took his arm, saying lowly, “Today is the first time, Meng dage, would you care to accompany me to the imperial Jing residence for a stroll?”

Chapter 81: A Pure and Innocent Heart

Mei Changsu smiled and took his arm, saying lowly, “Today is the first time, Meng dage, would you care to accompany me to the imperial Jing residence for a stroll?”

“Good,” Meng Zhi replied without hesitation, then turned and took down the fur-lined cloak from its hanger, draping it over Mei Changsu’s shoulders. “It will be damp in the tunnel, put this on.”

“Are you really going to go with me?” Something flashed across Mei Changsu’s gaze. “Then, when Prince Jing asks why you’re with me, how will you answer?”

Meng Zhi had not thought up to this point, and stared blankly as he said, “I thought he knew....”

“He knows you and I have interacted before, and he also knows you appreciate me, and are partial towards me....” Mei Changsu gazed fixedly at this Commander of the Imperial Guard. “But he does not know the truth of the relationship between you and me. If you emerge with me out of the most secret tunnel in the entire capital, then this will reveal to him that the relationship between us is ten times closer than he had previously thought, and how could he not be stunned? How could he not inquire further until he reached the truth?”

“Then....” Meng Zhi furrowed his brow and thought for awhile. “Let’s say that you’ve saved my life in the past, and I am repaying this debt, or say that you have some information you can use against me, so I have no choice but to....”

Mei Changsu laughed in spite of himself as he shook his head. “Jingyan is not so easy to fool. What kind of a rank is the Commander General? If you were really only repaying a debt, or only under a threat, then at the most I could only use you a little. If you were not in my absolute confidence, if you were not someone I trust as much as I would my own hand or foot, how would I have

told you about this secret tunnel, which itself holds the key to my life or death, to my success or failure?”

“Xiao Shu,” Meng Zhi suddenly grabbed his hand, “tell him everything, tell him the truth about our relationship, and tell him the truth about your....”

Mei Changsu’s gaze suddenly grew cold, and the gentle expression in his eyes suddenly frosted over like ice, freezing all emotion beneath its surface, and even his tone of voice grew a little cold.

“Meng dage, what I am most afraid of, is that you will not be able to hold yourself back in this....” Mei Changsu gripped Meng Zhi’s hand tightly, the tips of his fingers digging into his skin. “In the future, you and Jingyan will have more and more chances to interact, but you must remember, above all else, no matter what, you must grit your teeth and never tell him who I am, not even one word!”

“But why?! Why must you bear this weight alone? If Prince Jing knew the truth, he would surely....”

“On the contrary, that would ruin everything.” Mei Changsu cut him off coolly. “Prince Jing’s resolve to strive for the throne is currently quite steady, he has listened to all of my advice regardless of how he feels, and he has cooperated with all of my plans and actions, and has never protested, do you know why?”

“Because....” Meng Zhi stammered, unable to finish his sentence.

“Because his heart is free from distraction, and to him, the throne is currently the most important consideration. Everything I do for him, he has only to consider whether it is beneficial towards this goal, and that is all. As for what consequences all of this will have for Mei Changsu himself, he simply does not need to care.” Mei Changsu’s tone was cold, but as he smiled, a hint of grief drifted across his gaze in spite of himself. “But once he knows that I am Lin Shu, the sequence of priorities will reverse, he will not be

able to help himself in wanting to protect me, to leaving a way out for me, and that would tie both of our hands, and we would become a hindrance to one another in the end....”

Meng Zhi knew Prince Jing’s nature and character well, and so knew that he had spoken truly, and he could find no way to refute his words, only feeling a grief well up in his heart, a pain that was difficult to suppress.

“Actually, on the other hand, not telling him will lighten my burden as well.” Mei Changsu drew a deep breath and forced a smile. “Jingyan and I are too close as friends, if I stand before him as Mei Changsu, then no matter what I plot or scheme, I do not feel much of anything, but as soon as I turn back into Lin Shu, then it would be difficult to avoid feeling sad and hurt, and there will be an inexplicable restlessness in my heart. If I gave in to such emotions, never mind the throne, many human lives would also be implicated in such a fall....”

“Don’t say any more....” At this moment, even iron-warrior Meng Zhi’s eyes were rimmed with red. “I promise you, no matter what, I will never reveal even half a word.... And it doesn’t matter if Prince Jing doesn’t know, there’s still me, xiao Shu, from now on, Meng dage will look after you, I will die before I let anyone wrong you again....”

Mei Changsu held back the surge of emotions in his chest and lightly patted him on the shoulder, saying soothingly, “Don’t worry, Jingyan is not one of those heartless types who get rid of people as soon as they stop being useful, and who are willing to share in suffering but not in reward, so I will not come to much grief in the future.”

“That’s true,” Meng Zhi sighed. “Bad at trickery and tactics, bad at adapting to change, and valuing friendship and loyalty too highly – these have always been Prince Jing’s faults. You have your work cut out for you, helping him to the throne.”

Mei Changsu turned his head slightly towards the window, his face as clear as pure snow, an icy smile playing lightly at the corner of his lips as he said coldly, “In our Da Liang, do we still lack for harsh and suspicious emperors who only know how to play in the schemes and feuds of the court? Helping Jingyan to the throne will be a bit difficult, but once we succeed, then, by his unswerving determination and unyielding will, by his keen observations and honest discernment, by his orderly style of work and just conduct, would he not make a good Emperor? As long as internal friction is decreased, a ruler and his ministers can work as one to repair and build up a benevolent government. In these recent years, you’ve seen as well, in the court, the ministers do not think about politics, and the military does not think about war, they are occupied only with guessing at how to please their superiors, and with how to secure and guard their own power and positions. It is fortunate that Da Liang’s power is still strong and solid, and its political system robust and sound, and so it is just about holding up under this empty frame, but if the next dynasty is like this as well, I fear our nation’s power would continue to crumble, and if we do not work to pull ourselves together now, in the future, when tigers and wolves come from every side to tear us apart, how will we defend our country and protect our people?”

His voice was deep and low, and his tone was not passionate, but as Meng Zhi listened, he felt as if the blood in his veins all over his body had suddenly sped up, and it was as if a scalding iron had been placed on his chest. Restoring the dignity of the imperial court by reviving law and discipline, and draining away the tainted pools and replacing them with fresh water – this had always been the long-cherished wish of the Emperor’s eldest son, Prince Qi. Back in those years when Meng Zhi had been in the Chiyan Army, he too had once heard this wise prince describe his vision of an ideal court. But after his death, the crowd of shining talent that had gathered in his manor was scattered to the winds, some were implicated in his crime and died as well, some disappeared into

hiding, some changed their aspirations with time, and some had been oppressed all along and could not rise in the ranks, and all that was left in the court was a horde of yes-men, sinking in a heavy, lethargic fog. The Emperor's pleasure and anger became the standard by which everything was measured, and all anyone thought about was how to acquire power, how to curry favour, and how to choose the correct stance to secure the best future. The Crown Prince and Prince Yu certainly never seemed to tire of this game, and had practically written the art of toying with others' will into the guiding texts of how to rule a country. If there was anyone left in the entire palace of Da Liang who still bore a little of Prince Qi's ideals about governing a nation, then, in truth, there only remained Prince Jing, who had grown up by Xiao Jingyu's side, receiving his teachings from a young age.

“Meng dage,” Mei Changsu smiled faintly, as if he had read his thoughts from the expression in his eyes, and said lightly, “Do you understand now? There are many things I cannot let Jingyan take responsibility for, alongside me. If we must journey into hell, and become demons with hearts full of poison, then let me be the one to do so, Jingyan's pure and innocent heart must be preserved. Although there are some things he must understand, and some naive ideas he must alter, I will do my best to preserve his principles and his standards, he must not become too tainted in the process of the fight for the throne. If the person I help to the throne in the future is an Emperor of the same temperament as the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, then Jingyu gege and the Chiyang Army will truly have died in vain....”

Meng Zhi's heart was a turmoil of emotions, and he could only nod heavily, unable to speak for a long time. Although he had promised Mei Changsu many times not to reveal the truth, it was only in this moment that he truly yielded, and carved his sworn word into his heart.

Mei Changsu's gaze had resumed its peaceful and gentle

expression, and he leaned against his desk as he said, “Meng dage, when I asked you to accompany me today to the imperial Jing manor, I was joking. In order not to raise Jingyan’s suspicions, I’m afraid you must come to me from his side.”

Meng Zhi didn’t understand immediately, and blurted out, “Come to you from his side? How?”

Mei Changsu was feeling a bit tired, and he sat down in a wooden chair nearby, gesturing for Meng Zhi to sit as well as he said slowly, “Recently, because of the case of the murdered eunuchs, the Emperor has grown suspicious towards you without any good reason, and your two vice commanders have been transferred away as well, everyone has seen this, and naturally, Prince Jing also knows that you have been wronged. I will find an opportunity to advise Prince Jing, he can take this chance to interact with you more, and take in your men into his manor. As for you, do your best to subtly make him understand your distaste for the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, and your reminiscence of Prince Qi. Your relationship has been good all along, and once it is a little closer, you can pretend to accidentally discover the entrance to the tunnel in his bedroom, and force him to tell you the truth. When that happens, you can take him into your confidence entirely, and express to him that although you yourself would never forsake the Emperor, in the matter of the succession, you can support him. Prince Jing has always known of your loyalty, and understands your inclinations, so he will certainly believe you beyond a doubt. Since the tunnel has already been discovered by you, he cannot hide it even if he wishes to, and then, it should be you accompanying him, and arriving here to give me a fright....”

“Oh you....” Meng Zhi couldn’t help laughing. “Let me see how big that brain of yours is, well in that case, I will logically end up as both of your confidants, it is only that Prince Jing must first receive a good scare....”

“If it were not essential for Prince Jing to know that you are on

our side, in order to facilitate events in the future, why would I come up with something like this? Afterwards, we will both be fellow-workers serving the same lord, and there are no conflicts between us, so even if our friendship seems to deepen, Prince Jing would not think it strange, so isn't this better than any kind of excuse of repaying a debt?"

"You're right, let's do it your way. It's just that, tonight, I cannot accompany you on this first time."

"You have kept me company as my guest this whole day, I am tired as well, and there is nothing urgent, so I had not planned to go over anyway. It is not early, you should return to your residence, or Sister-in-law will be worried about you."

Meng Zhi examined his complexion closely, then said frowning, "You do look a bit pale, you must really have worked too hard today. The tunnel is here, and if you do not go today, it will not disappear, it's more important to rest and take care of your health. I'll stop bothering you, go in and sleep."

Mei Changsu was indeed very tired, and he did not need to keep up courtesy around Meng Zhi, and so he only nodded and then went straight into his room, lay down on his bed, and went to sleep. Fei Liu, who was in a little bed in the room, lifted his head, and seeing that it was him, only blinked twice before closing his eyes again, and it was difficult to tell whether he had truly woken or not.

At this adorable display, Meng Zhi felt a smile spread across his face, but he made no sound, and only carefully closed the windows and doors and blew out the candle on the desk before quietly taking his leave.

Chapter 82: Secret Chamber

It seemed to be a quiet night. There was no wind, no rain, and the clear light of the gentle moon was filtered through a thin layer of clouds, so that the moonlight did not pierce through the window and dazzle the eye. Mei Changsu slept very peacefully, without coughing, and without needing to rise in the middle of the night to sit up for awhile because of the pain in his chest. This kind of warm spring season was suited to rest, and the brazier in the room had been taken away just the day before, so the air was unusually fresh, and even outside the room, there was not the usual summer cacophony of crickets to disturb the quiet. In such perfect calm, it would be a beautiful thing indeed to sleep dreamless through the night until dawn.

“Su gege!”

Unless he was drifting in and out of consciousness, Mei Changsu had otherwise always been a light sleeper, and with a few gentle shakes, he had awoken, and now he peered through half-lidded eyes, reaching out a hand to touch the forehead of the person before him as he asked, his voice still a little hoarse, “What is it, Fei Liu?”

“Knocking!”

Although Mei Changsu had always had the uncanny ability to perfectly understand Fei Liu’s meaning from his simple expressions, at this moment, he couldn’t help being a little taken aback, and he had to sit up and clear his mind for a few moments before suddenly realizing what he meant.

He hurriedly dressed and tied back his hair, threw on a sable fur-lined cloak, and accepted the warm cup of tea from Fei Liu, drinking it quickly to warm his throat. Then he picked up a cotton washcloth and wiped his face before walking rapidly to the bookshelf and tapping with his foot at several places on the clean,

shining floorboards. The wall opened to reveal a narrow passageway, just wide enough for a single person to pass through. Fei Liu was about to go in first, but Mei Changsu grabbed him and said lowly, "Today, you will not come, wait for Su gege outside, alright?"

The youth looked at him unhappily, but submitted obediently, pressing to one side as Mei Changsu slipped into the entrance, and then, with some hidden maneuvers from inside the tunnel, the entire wall returned to its original appearance. Fei Liu dragged over a chair and sat, his dark pupils fixed intently on the wall, keeping watch gravely.

After Mei Changsu entered the passage, he drew out a glowing pearl from his robes and operated the machinery again to lower himself several feet, arriving at the entrance to a long tunnel. He walked along it a little way, and then opened a stone door to reveal a room, with tables and chairs and some simple decorations. The lamp on the wall had already been lit, and under its yellow glow, Prince Jing stood in plain clothes, turning towards Mei Changsu as he entered slowly, and nodded to him in greeting.

"Mister Su, I have caused you alarm."

Mei Changsu bowed. "It is my duty to answer Your Highness' summons, there is no need to speak of alarm. It is only that I got up in a hurry, and my appearance is untidy, pray Your Highness forgive me."

Prince Jing evidently had something on his mind, but he still managed to smile slightly, and gestured for Mei Changsu to sit.

He had come in the middle of the night, so he must have some difficult matter at hand, but he adhered to the courtesies and was polite as usual, so evidently, it was not anything urgent or desperate, so Mei Changsu obliged and sat down before asking gently, "What has Your Highness come to see me about?"

Prince Jing furrowed his brow and muttered to himself for a

while before saying, “Actually.....this originally should not be a matter over which Mister Su should trouble himself, in fact, it has no relation to the things we are planning. It is only.....I truly have no one with whom to discuss this, and so came to seek Mister’s wisdom.”

“Since I have chosen to serve Your Highness, anything that concerns Your Highness concerns me, there is no need to consider whether it has relation or not. Pray Your Highness explain the matter, and if there is anything I can do, I will certainly do my best.”

Prince Jing seemed to have anticipated his response, and he immediately smiled back at him and said, “Then I will speak plainly. This afternoon, I went into the palace to greet my mother, and Jingning meimei came to find me. As soon as she saw me, she began crying and begging me to save her, saying that.....Da Chu is sending ambassadors to ask for a marriage agreement, they will arrive in the capital next month, and if Father Emperor agrees, then she is the only princess of a suitable age....”

“A marriage agreement with Da Chu?” Mei Changsu looked intent as he pondered. “With Princess Nihuang overseeing the Southern border, Liang and Chu have been at a deadlock, and have not fought in recent years. With this marriage pact, Da Chu must be intending to secure peace, but we in Da Liang can also take this opportunity to restore the military and economical deficits we have accumulated in these past two years, so this is not a bad option. But if we are to establish a relationship based on marriage, then naturally it must be reciprocal, if we send a princess over to be married, then they should also send a princess to us, or else it would not be an even agreement. If Da Chu has only come to request a princess for marriage, then His Majesty may not agree, but if they too suggest sending a princess over to us to be married, then there is eight parts likelihood that His Majesty would agree.”

Prince Jing looked helplessly at the person before him, who had

so immediately entered into his strategist's mode, and sighed. "Mister Su, I do not want to know how likely it is that my Father Emperor will agree, I want to ask, if Father Emperor agrees to the marriage agreement, whether there is any way Jingning can avoid being married. You know as well as I, she already has someone in her heart...."

Mei Changsu gazed at a shadow beyond his own fingertips for a long time before slowly lifting his gaze to Prince Jing's face. "Your Highness, at present, what Princesses are there of a marrying age?"

Prince Jing looked at him blankly, and then gritted his teeth, "There is only Jingning...."

"The daughters of royal princes, unmarried and of a suitable age, who can be raised to the rank of Princess, how many are there?"

".....among Father Emperor's brothers, some scattered when he succeeded to the throne, so there only remains my three royal uncles, Prince Ji, Prince Qian, and Prince Li, and of their daughters who are grown and unmarried, there are probably three or four....."

"Duchess Mingzhu has consumption, Duchess Mingchen has a crippled left leg, Duchess Mingrui left her home six months ago and shaved her head to become a nun, and Duchess Mingying is said to be mad. Since this marriage pact is to repair relations, who among these do you think His Majesty could raise in rank?"

Prince Jing was not too familiar with the situation of the women of the royal clan, but since Mei Changsu had explained it thus, naturally he would not be wrong, and he felt his spirits sink, but after thinking for a long while, he suddenly remembered another person, and said hurriedly, "I vaguely remember, there is a Duchess Mingjue in Uncle Prince Li's family, of the same age as Jingning...."

Mei Changsu laughed coldly, "Princess Mingjue is in love with a young man from the family of the previous dynasty's governor of

Nangong, and it was only because his mother passed away just before they were about to be engaged that marriage has been temporarily postponed. Everyone in the capital knows about this, but Your Highness was away with your army at the time, and so did not hear about this at the time.”

Prince Jing listened dazedly, a muscle jumping in his jaw. “So, according to Mister’s meaning, once Father Emperor agrees, Jingning will have no way out?”

Mei Changsu’s expression was indifferent and when he spoke his voice was cold, but there was a hint of pity deep in his gaze. “Jingning is a princess, even if she was not wedded to a foreigner, her marriage will inevitably be arranged for her, has she still not come to terms with this reality?”

“Though the words are true, the emotions are difficult to bear. Guan Zhen has spent some time with me now, and he is indeed an impressive young man. I, too, do not have the heart to see them torn apart in this way.”

“No matter how impressive Guan Zhen is, his birth is too lowly, and he has no brilliant achievements or outstanding deeds that can be praised to the skies, so in the end, the lord’s position cannot fall to him. Princess Jingning was born to the imperial family, and should know well, what love can be hoped for within these palace walls? If she clings to this reason in her heart, she will not only fail to convince His Majesty, she will sully her pure reputation, and bring calamity onto Guan Zhen’s entire clan. So, in this matter, Your Highness, you cannot help her. Ask my lady Concubine Jing to speak to her, and convince her. Putting aside princesses, how many girls of common families can truly choose their husbands as they wish?”

Prince Jing let out a long sigh. “Everything you have said, I have already known. But seeing Jingning crying like that, I truly pitied her, and thought perhaps Mister might have some strange and wondrous ideas, and so came to discuss the matter.”

Mei Changsu glanced at him, and said suddenly, “Since you mentioned this, Your Highness, have you only thought about Princess Jingning?”

Prince Jing looked at him blankly, not understanding what he meant.

“If Da Chu sends a princess over to be married, she must be married to a prince, and not as a concubine either. Your Highness, think about it, who will be the one chosen to receive her?”

“Ah?!” Prince Jing immediately understood the meaning behind his words, and unconsciously pressed hard against the table. “Mister is saying....”

Mei Changsu looked serious as he answered, “Da Chu is still an enemy nation, and there has never been any news of a Chu princess of particular fame or reputation like Nihuang. His Majesty is suspicious by nature, and since Your Highness has decided to pursue the throne, taking the princess of an enemy nation as your wife would not be a good thing. I will have to find a way to help Your Highness dodge this particular bout of fate.”

Prince Jing looked shaken. “Then, since Mister has a way for me to avoid marriage, for Jingning....”

“Isn’t the situation different? Among the princesses, only Jingning is suited for marriage, but among the princes, Your Highness is not the only choice. The Crown Prince and Prince Yu have wives, and His Majesty would never consider allowing those two to wed princesses of enemy nations anyway, so we can put them aside. As for those who remain, although His Highness the emperor’s third son has a slight handicap, and although His Highness the emperor’s fifth son only cares about studying and ignores politics, they are still genuine princes and sons of the Emperor, and are still unmarried. The princes who look furthest from the throne are the ones most suitable to be wedded in this arrangement. So once His Majesty agrees to the pact, he will

certainly choose one of the three of you. Before the engagement is set, the fortunes of your birth dates must first be told. Princess Jingning's birth date will be sent to Da Chu for the matching, so there is nothing we can do, but the Da Chu princess' birth date will be sent here for our ritual masters to perform the matching. I can find a way to arrange for the result of this matching to turn out according to our will. It doesn't matter who ends up marrying her, we have only to ensure that Your Highness' birth date does not make a fortuitous match with the Da Chu princess'."

"What, even the ritual masters obey your command?"

"I cannot say they obey, but.....there are some things that can be done."

Prince Jing turned and fixed his deep gaze onto Mei Changsu. "When Mister Su first entered the capital, you gave the impression that you had been pressed by the Crown Prince and Prince Yu to come, as a result of your qilin prodigy's reputation. But now, I can see that your preparations have been extensive indeed, as if you have been anticipating this for some time...."

Mei Changsu smiled carelessly, and answered, his voice calm, "With a talent such as mine, I was never content to stay hidden in the jianghu world, quietly letting the world pass by. It is said that the ambition of every man is to serve his country and to make a name for himself, like smoke rising into the sky. If I did not have confidence in the preparation I had made, how would I have dared to turn down the easy roads offered by the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, and instead decide to serve Your Highness as my lord, with all my heart and my will?"

Prince Jing turned over these words in his heart, but could not tell whether they were true or false, and did not want to examine them too closely. Mei Changsu truly desired with all his heart to help him to the throne, Xiao Jingyan had never doubted this point, but as for the true reason why Mei Changsu had chosen him, he still had many questions in his heart. But at this moment, Prince

Jing was not inclined to search too deeply for the answer, as at present there were still many difficulties ahead, and many important matters that took priority for his consideration. To him, this mysterious strategist was the sharpest sword in his hand, and it was enough to use him well. As for how this sword had been forged, and why its blade had been unsheathed, at this moment, he simply did not care too much.

The secret chamber was no tea house, and as the conversation was over, there was no reason to continue sitting around chatting. Although the reason for his coming had not been met, Prince Jing understood all along that there had not been much hope in Jingning avoiding this fate, and although he was a bit disappointed, he was not dismayed. The two bade each other farewell, and then returned separately along the secret tunnel to their own rooms.

Chapter 83: Concubine Jing

Although Xiao Jingyan had established his own official residence and even had his own army, he was still only a prince born of a concubine, who barely had a duke's rank, and was not like Prince Yu, who enjoyed many special privileges. Therefore, except for special days like the first day of each lunar month, public holidays, his birthday, his mother's birthday, or days of sacrifice, he could not enter the Inner Palace without imperial permission. After Xiao Jingning had pleaded for his help, she did not see so much as the shadow of her Seventh Brother for many days, and she grew so anxious that she broke palace rules and sent one of her serving maids to Prince Jing's residence, to deliver a hand-written letter to Guan Zhen. Before the maid had even made it out of Dingan Gate, she was caught by imperial guards. Meng Zhi heard of the situation and rushed over, confiscating the letter and releasing the maid back into the Inner Palace before severely forbidding his subordinates from speaking of this matter to anyone, quietly covering it up. That night, he paid a secret visit to the imperial Jing manor and showed Xiao Jingyan the letter, urging him to send Guan Zhen away from the capital as soon as possible.

Prince Jing knew that, ever since eunuchs had been murdered in the palace, Meng Zhi's hold over the imperial guard was not as tight or solid as it had been once, and although it would be good if this matter could really be covered up, if it leaked somehow to the Emperor or the Empress, Guan Zhen's life would be forfeit, and so he could only send Guan Zhen far away to the border, hiding him away to save his life. Sure enough, two or three days later, the Emperor heard about the Princess smuggling her maid out of the palace. He had always doted on this young daughter of his, and so naturally his fury was terrible to behold, and he ordered for Meng Zhi to be summoned, and began questioning him in a thundering rage.

Meng Zhi came well-prepared, and after waiting for the Emperor to finish venting his anger, he bowed and answered slowly, “If His Majesty finds any fault with me, your servant should of course die a thousand deaths as payment for my crimes. But, since time immemorial, the reputation of the ladies of the palace has always been the most important consideration, and though your servant holds this position of Commander of the Imperial Guard by your Majesty’s great mercy, your servant is nonetheless only an outer official. That maid was the Princess’ personal attendant, and the letter was sealed. Your servant firstly had no right to question anyone from the inner palace, and secondly could not open a confidential correspondence. Without questioning or reading, your servant could not know its authenticity. Without knowing its authenticity, how could your servant dare to report this matter to Your Majesty? And so, your servant could only escort the maid back into the inner palace, command my subordinates to keep silent, and burn the letter. Only in this way could this matter remain concealed, so that it would not harm the Princess’ sacred virtue. Your servant’s knowledge is crude and shallow, and if your servant has acted improperly in any way, pray Your Majesty name my punishment.”

After hearing his explanation, the Emperor thought it sounded very logical. It was best to let this kind of private matter of the inner palace disappear quietly if at all possible, as if it was thoroughly investigated, the results would only bring shame upon himself and make him lose face. As soon as he thought about it like this, his anger dissipated, and he ordered Meng Zhi to rise and said a few words to placate him, then recalled the internal messenger he had sent to the Princess’ palace to investigate, instead issuing a secret command to the Empress to increase her surveillance over Jingning, and then quietly let the matter pass.

Meng Zhi and Prince Jing’s relationship had been good all along, and this time, when he made a purposeful effort to protect him by not letting anyone realize that the Princess’ love interest had been

taken in by Prince Jing's residence, it was clearly a great show of goodwill towards him. Prince Jing had already received a quiet urging from Mei Changsu to befriend Meng Zhi, and after receiving this favour, the interactions between the two gradually increased, and although it had still not risen to a degree to be easily noticed by others, the confidence and trust between the two had deepened significantly.

At the same time, Meng Zhi also followed Mei Changsu's plan and appeared especially eager and helpful. One day, when he was at the imperial Jing manor participating in a riding and archery competition Prince Jing had organized, he took the chance, and using the excuse of wanting to see the double-edged sword Prince Jing had seized from the Northern Di king, he was shown into Prince Jing's bedroom, where the sword was kept, where he very coincidentally stumbled upon the entrance to the hidden tunnel.

And so, in this way, Meng Zhi successfully became the first court official to know of the lord and servant relationship between Prince Jing and Mei Changsu, and he took the opportunity to express to Prince Jing that, so long as doing so would not defy the Emperor's command, he would certainly support him in the fight for the throne.

By this time, it was April.

The Da Chu ambassadors arrived outside of Jinling bearing impressive gifts, and as the Chu Emperor had sent his own nephew Prince Ling, Yuwen Xuan, as lead ambassador, the Liang Emperor naturally had to return the courtesy by arranging a member of his own royal family to meet them, and so Prince Yu received the imperial command and went to the city gates to welcome the party, arranging for them to stay at one of the outer residences of the imperial family, Baocheng Palace.

From the seriousness expressed by the Da Chu side and the courtesy shown by the Da Liang side, it seemed that this marriage pact was already seven or eight parts decided, and the meeting was

only to facilitate the discussion of certain details.

A marriage pact between these two countries was no small matter. Although it had not yet been set in stone, preparations were already beginning in the palace and the court. On the fifth day after lead ambassador Yuwen Xuan's audience with His Majesty, two imperial edicts were passed, the first raising Princess Jingning to a nine-pearl Princess, and the second bestowing unto the fifth-born Prince Huai his own official residence and seat. This seemed to reveal that the preliminary candidates for the marriage pact had already been chosen.

She had cried, and fought, and even attempted a hunger strike in protest, but in the end, Xiao Jingning finally yielded. As a Princess of Da Liang, she had understood from the beginning the shackles of responsibility that she could not shed, and her defiance against her father was only because she was unwilling to give up the happiness she had chosen for herself, and in the end, this defiance met only unfeeling imperial will. The Empress sent her most trusted serving girls to watch over the Princess night and day, and concubines and consorts from different palaces took their turns persuading and urging her in a hundred different ways. And so, in the Inner Palace, where the will of their lord Emperor was treated as law, Jingning did not receive any open support. This was because, to most of the cool eyes observing the scene, Jingning's fate was no different from that of other princesses through the ages, and although she had not been more fortunate than most despite the Emperor's doting on her, neither was she any less fortunate.

Every time Prince Jing entered the palace, he would go to visit this little sister of his, and as he saw that she was slowly accepting the reality of the situation, his worry began to lessen. When Xiao Jingning begged him to look after Guan Zhen in the future, he did not even have to think before giving her his word.

Recently, the Crown Prince was under punishment and could not

participate in politics, and Prince Yu was even more active than usual in the court, participating enthusiastically in every debate that arose, regardless of the topic. The court was yet far from pledging him its complete loyalty, but in the face of his current triumph, unless he committed some grave mistake, most of the officials would not obstruct his rise. And, for some reason, in the last month, even the officials of the Crown Prince's camp were being unusually respectful, and did not face off hotly against Prince Yu as they had done in the past. This prince was not only known for his virtuous appearance, his ability was not mediocre either, and his manor was full of talent as well, so it was rare indeed that he ever made truly unforgivable mistakes in important matters, and so, more and more, it began to look as if he was gaining the support of the court. No one knew what the Emperor thought about this, but on the surface, it did seem as if his favour towards Prince Yu was only increasing, as every time he encountered a difficult situation, he would discuss it first with him, and ask for his opinion. Word began to spread that His Highness Prince Yu would soon become His Highness the Crown Prince.

This kind of rumour naturally made its way to the Emperor's ear, and when he questioned Meng Zhi, who was standing watch beside him as usual, Meng Zhi claimed to have never heard any such rumour. Although the Emperor admired his commitment to staying out of affairs unrelated to his work, he was still uneasy in his heart. Restless, he dismissed his carriage, and instead walked slowly back to the Inner Palace, accompanied only by his personal guards.

"Your Majesty, you will be going this evening to...." Gao Zhan, the head eunuch of the Six Palaces, listened attentively, waiting to notify the chosen palace so they could make preparations to receive the Emperor.

The Emperor's steps slowed. The Empress had always been

solemn and averse to pleasure. Recently, Consort Yue only spent her days crying for the Crown Prince, so he did not wish to see her either. The younger beauties were charming and gaudy, but he was not in that kind of mood today. And so, in the end, he only frowned, and ignored Gao Zhan.

Eunuch Gao, who had almost perfected the art of interpreting facial expressions, refrained from asking further, and only bowed as he followed behind the Emperor.

Lanterns lit the road ahead. Candlelight flickered from behind windows, glowing softly in the hazy dusk. But the Emperor turned towards the darkest paths, as if purposefully seeking out a kind of quiet calm.

He walked and walked, and suddenly, the scent of medicinal herbs drifted past. He raised his head and saw a small courtyard before him, simple and plain, as if he had left behind the glorious splendour of the imperial palace and entered into an elegant little herbal garden.

“What is this place?”

Gao Zhan hurriedly replied, “Your Majesty, this is the residence of my lady the Concubine Jing.”

“Concubine Jing....” The Emperor closed his eyes, as if in reminiscence.That’s right, Concubine Jing, Jingyan’s mother.....he saw her often, when the ladies of the palace came to pay their respects on festivals and holidays, and she always stood quietly and inconspicuously near the back, never speaking unless spoken to, just as she had done since she first entered the palace.

“Gao Zhan, it’s been nearly thirty years since Concubine Jing entered the palace, hm?”

A sheen of cold sweat broke out on Gao Zhan’s back. He didn’t dare answer anything more than a quiet, “Yes.”

“After Yueyao gave birth to Jingyu, she was always sick, and

didn't seem to improve even after many years, so the Lin family was worried, and sent a female physician into the palace to care for her.....we remember, Yueyao always treated her like a sister....”

Consort Chen Lin Yueyao, the Emperor's eldest son Xiao Jingyu, these were all forbidden and taboo topics one could not bring up casually around the Emperor. Gao Zhan's underclothes were half soaked in sweat, and he forced himself to slow his breathing as he bowed even lower.

The Emperor eyed him coldly, “You do not need to look so scared.....go, send in my command, and have Concubine Jing prepare to receive me.”

“Yes.”

Shortly after, the herbal-scented Zhiluo Palace lit up with lanterns and candles, and Concubine Jing and her serving girls emerged in formal dress, kneeling at the door to receive the Emperor.

The Emperor did not look at her closely, and only said, “Rise,” before striding into the main rooms. Concubine Jing hurriedly got up and followed, helping him remove his outer robes, and after glancing quietly at his face, she said gracefully, “Your Majesty looks fatigued, perhaps a herbal bath would be desirable?”

The Emperor knew she had been a physician and was naturally familiar with herbal remedies, and besides he was indeed tired, so he nodded his permission. Concubine Jing ordered for hot water and a bathing tub to be brought in, and prepared the herbs herself. Soon, the preparations were complete and she helped the Emperor into the tub, lit a stick of herbal incense, and then began to massage his head and shoulders. Although Concubine Jing was not young, and had never been a stunning beauty, her heart was tranquil, and her appearance well-maintained. Her hair was still dark, and her hands were smooth and strong, so her massage was very comfortable indeed.

It had been a long time since the Emperor had felt so peaceful and relaxed.

“Your Majesty, herbal baths dry the mouth, perhaps some herbal tea?” Concubine Jing asked quietly, lifting the slender cup to his lips. The Emperor did not even open his eyes as he drank slowly from the cup in her hands. The tea was crisp and fresh, with none of the bitterness of medicine, and suddenly, in his mind, blurred figures seemed to arise vaguely in the distance.

“Concubine Jing....we have neglected you in these years....” The Emperor raised his head and said with a sigh, holding her hand.

Hearing this, Concubine Jing did not seize the opportunity to air her grievances, but neither did she express humble thanks for these beautiful words. She only smiled, as if she had not taken his words to heart, and continued to gently massage the Emperor’s aching neck and shoulders.

“So many years have gone by in the blink of an eye, and we are growing old....” The Emperor knew well her quiet and contented nature, and so did not seem to mind her silence. “There is not much we can do to make up for it, but Jingyan is filial, and he will be a blessing to you.”

“Your Majesty speaks truly, with Jingyan here, your servant is content. This child values filial piety, and has a loyal heart, and whenever he is in the capital, he will always come to pay his greetings. As long as I can see him, your servant is happy, no matter what.”

The Emperor glanced at her, but her clear, gentle gaze was only full of motherly affection, and his heart softened. “Jingyan is a good and loyal child, how could we not know that? It is only that he is a little stubborn.....some of his talents have been suppressed, and we have not given him many opportunities. But do not worry, we will take care of him, the battlefield is deadly and dangerous, and in the future, we will send him out as little as possible....”

“If it is the need of the court, he ought to go if he should go,” Concubine Jing said tranquilly. “Your servant is not familiar with matters outside the palace, but as a prince, it is the duty of his birth to protect the country. Although this child is not ostentatious, he holds Your Majesty in his heart, and Da Liang as well. If Your Majesty protects him out of love, and allows him to remain in the capital in ease and comfort, he would feel even more wronged.”

The Emperor couldn't help smiling. “You are right. Jingyan has an honest heart, and even when he is wronged, he will not come to us to protest. Although it is true that we are lord and servant before father and son, sometimes he is a little too distant. In this way, he is rather like you.”

“The dragon has nine sons, and each is unique. Your Majesty's own princes are naturally distinct in their personalities as well.”

The Emperor's brow jumped, and he thought again of the fight between the Crown Prince and Prince Yu, and a wave of melancholy arose in his heart.

To the emperors of dynasties past and present, having a unanimously beloved heir with both talent and integrity by their sides was not necessarily a comfortable situation. And so, although he had declared a Crown Prince, he nonetheless heaped favour onto Prince Yu in order to weaken the Eastern Palace's influence, so that it would not acquire enough power to threaten the throne. But Crown Prince Xiao Jingxuan's birth mother was a highly-favoured consort, and he himself had never committed any major errors, so you could not say that the Emperor had planned all along to remove his title. It was only this past half year, when his reputation had been sullied time and again, that the Emperor was truly angered, and began considering replacing his position, and so confined him to Guijia Palace and forbade him to participate in politics. Originally, Prince Yu was the most likely candidate for the Eastern Palace, and it would have been the natural conclusion for

him to replace the Crown Prince's position, but....

“Concubine Jing, what do you think about Prince Yu?” No one could deny that the Inner Palace had long established their own camps. But who could have thought that it was in the presence of this low-ranking concubine, who had stood aloof from worldly affairs for the past thirty years, that he could ask this question without doubt or hesitation?

“Your servant thinks Prince Yu has a handsome countenance and a noble manner, and is a very lordly prince.”

“We were not asking about his appearance....”

“I beg Your Majesty's forgiveness, apart from his appearance and manner, your servant has very little knowledge about Prince Yu. I have heard the ladies of the palace discussing him on occasion, and saying that he is a wise prince.”

“Hmph,” the Emperor scoffed. “What do women of the palace know about wisdom? This kind of saying must have been passed along from somewhere else! These days, whenever the court discusses anything, all the ministers look to him first and follow his word blindly, he must be wise indeed!”

“This too must be because of Your Majesty's heavy favour,” Concubine Jing answered indifferently. “Before, when the Crown Prince was in the court, was it not also like this?”

Her seemingly offhand comments struck the Emperor hard.

Even the Crown Prince, lord of the Eastern Palace and governing by imperial will, had not experienced such wholehearted support in the court. Prince Yu was yet only a Royal Prince, and he already commanded such respect and influence, if he was crowned as heir, he feared....

“Your Majesty, the water has cooled, please rise.” Concubine Jing did not seem to notice that the Emperor was deep in thought, and helped him up as she called for towels to be brought, helping him

dry himself and change into soft robes, and then guided him over to the bed to sleep, kneeling down beside him to massage his feet.

“You must be tired as well,” the Emperor sat up and held onto Concubine Jing’s hands, which had been kneading busily. “....sleep.”

Concubine Jing turned her face to him serenely, the soft glow of the lamp erasing the lines of age on her face, making her appear even more gentle than usual. She gave him an unusually sweet smile, and answered lightly, “Yes, your Majesty....”

Chapter 84: Envoy from Da Chu

Three days later, the court released three imperial edicts all at once.

The Crown Prince was permitted to return to the Eastern Palace, where he would continue his confinement.

Consort Yue was restored to her position as Noble Consort, as reward for her repentance and regret.

Concubine Jing was raised to Consort Jing.

Both court and commoners were thrown into a frenzy, as everyone tried to guess what their unfathomable Emperor meant by issuing these edicts.

Compared to the blinding spotlight of Consort Yue's restoration to Noble Consort, Concubine Jing's elevation in rank did not attract much attention. After all, she had lived in the palace for more than thirty years and had never brought any shame to herself, and furthermore, her son was a grown prince who had his own imperial residence, so in truth she ought to have been made consort long ago, and it was only that she had been neglected for many years. The ladies of the Inner Palace came to pay their respects and congratulations, but after fulfilling this courtesy, most of the crowd rushed away towards the Noble Consort Yue's Zhaoren palace. Only a very few of the most astute were able to put together Prince Jing's additional new year's gift with Concubine Jing's promotion and come forward eagerly to curry favour, recognizing that a new power was emerging.

But both Consort Jing and Prince Jing seemed nonchalant, appearing polite but distant, and Consort Jing in particular only received her guests with her usual courtesy, and refused all congratulatory rites and bows. Aside from the change in her position in the arrangement the ladies adopted for their visits to the Empress, it was difficult to tell what practical advantage she

derived from this elevation in rank. Some even postulated that the Emperor had only carelessly bestowed this promotion onto her in order to make Noble Consort Yue's restoration seem less conspicuous.

Prince Jing had a somewhat different approach. He knew well that his understanding of the court ministers was insufficient, and he had complete trust in Mei Changsu's analysis and strategy, so he adhered strictly to Mei Changsu's list as he went about making friends. He displayed the same courtesies to everyone he encountered, but hidden within the courtesies were slight variations of familiarity and distance.

Mei Changsu knew that Prince Jing's approach to gaining support would require more time, but he also knew that it would also rest on a stronger foundation.

A few months ago, after Qingming, Princess Nihuang and Mu Qing had requested to return to Yunnan, but the Emperor had refused, holding them in the capital until now. But a few days after the Chu ambassadors entered the capital, he approved their request and permitted Nihuang to return to guard the Southern Border, but commanded Mu Qing to stay, with the official reason being that he had just come of age and the Grand Empress Dowager couldn't bear to part with him yet, and wanted him to stay awhile longer.

This transparent attempt at holding a hostage in the palace stirred up great waves in the imperial Mu residence, as every general of the Southern Border who had accompanied the two into the capital felt their hearts stir with rage and fury. It was Nihuang who remained calm and subdued her household, ensuring that no inappropriate words were spread beyond the gates of the manor. She then chose a few trusted confidants to stay in the capital with her younger brother, to whom she gave careful and thorough instructions, and it was only after all of these matters had been taken care of that she began to make plans for her own return to

Yunnan.

Before her departure, she went around the capital bidding her friends farewell, and finally, she arrived at Su manor.

The warm spring sunshine spilled into the newly renovated gardens of the Su manor. The cherry apple trees had shed their fruit, the peaches and pears had fallen from their branches, and a sense of grief hung in the air amidst the springtime flourish.

A single glance was enough to convey the trust between the two, the kind of intimate faith that endured beyond the borders of life and death. A small smile was enough to communicate the depth of feeling they shared, the warmth and affection that overflowed from their hearts. Today, Nihuang was not heavily made up, but was dressed in a wide-sleeved gown with a white jade pendant hanging from her belt. There was a plain camellia tucked into her hair, the simple adornment emphasizing her grace and natural beauty. Only the faint expression in her beautiful face revealed the thousand-tonne weight on her shoulders and the heavy burdens in her heart.

“Lin Shu gege, when Nihuang leaves this time, we will not see each other again for some time. Our Yunnan Mu clan still has some connections in the capital, this yellow jade pendant was handed down to me by my father’s father, and even Mu Qing is bound to follow the commands of he who holds this pendant. Today, I am entrusting it to dage, please, I beg of you, do not refuse it.”

After these earnest words, Nihuang fell forward onto her knees, a gleaming jade pendant cupped in both hands. The character ‘Mu’ was carved into its surface over a shimmering pattern of ripples and waves.

Mei Changsu’s gaze was solemn as he looked down slowly at the pendant. He understood that the girl before him, who shouldered the Yunnan Mu clan alone, was not only entrusting to him this jade pendant, but also the safety of her beloved younger brother in

the capital. If he accepted it, a heavy responsibility would fall onto his shoulders. But the moment did not allow for hesitation, and he had never thought of hesitating in the first place, so his only response was to quietly accept the pendant and raise Nihuang to her feet.

“Don’t worry, the Emperor is only trying to restrain your power, he does not harbour any suspicions. Mu Qing may not have had much experience, but he is a bright and agile child, and as long as I am in the capital, he will not come to any harm.”

A soft dimple appeared in Nihuang’s cheeks, but her gaze, as bright as moonlight, held the shine of tears. “Lin Shu gege, you..... must take care too....”

Mei Changsu smiled gently at her. There was nothing more to be said, and even Nie Duo did not need to be discussed. As long as they both understood the other’s worry, and knew, too, the purest and softest parts of each other’s hearts – that was enough.

On the tenth of April, Princess Nihuang departed the capital at dawn, accompanied by an envoy from the palace as a sign of the Emperor’s favour. Aside from these ministers who had come for ceremonial purposes, people like Xiao Jingrui, Yan Yujin, and Xia Dong had also naturally shown up, but there was no sign of Mei Changsu’s shadow amongst the crowd that had gathered to see the Princess off. Instead, they encountered another person, who seemed at first unexpected, but on second thought, perhaps should have come as no surprise.

The head ambassador of Da Chu, Yuwen Xuan, had the typical build of the Southern Chu – thin eyebrows over almond-shaped eyes, a tall stature, and narrow shoulders, giving him a somewhat lanky appearance, but once he started moving, the strength within the wiry frame became apparent.

The royalty of Da Chu did not lead their own armies, and so Yuwen Xuan had never fought directly against Princess Nihuang,

but everyone knew of the centuries-long enmity between Da Chu and the Mu clan, who had guarded the Southern Border for generations, not to mention the late Lord Mu had died fighting the Chu army, and Princess Nihuang herself had undergone many difficult experiences on the battlefield.

And so this Prince Ling of Da Chu had some guts indeed, daring to show up at the gates of the capital of Da Liang to see off the lady general of the Southern Border who had been his nation's enemy for many years.

As soon as he saw the Chu attire of the new arrivals and the Chu-styled decorations on their carriages, Mu Qing's expression darkened, but in contrast, a faint smile drifted over Princess Nihuang's face.

"Greetings, Princess Nihuang." Yuwen Xuan got down off his carriage and hurried forward in a bow.

"Your Highness, Prince Ling." Nihuang returned the courtesy. "Are you leaving the city?"

"Oh no, I came especially to see the Princess off, in order to express my thanks to the Princess." The corner of Yuwen Xuan's eyes crinkled in a smile.

His words were unexpected, and Nihuang couldn't help raising an eyebrow. "Thank me for what?"

"It is said that when countries go to war, the ones who suffer are the common people. I have always striven for peace between our two nations, that each might not invade nor disturb the other. However, the monarch of my humble country has always envied the glory of Jinling, and is forever striving northward. If not for the Princess' formidable strength in suppressing our invasions, I fear far more turmoil and chaos would have fallen upon us by now, and so, I must convey my deepest gratitude to the Princess."

The logic of his words seemed correct, but spoken from the

mouth of a member of the imperial family of Da Chu, they came out strangely, and made one uncomfortable. He seemed to be expressing genuine goodwill towards Nihuang, but there also seemed to be a hidden mocking beneath his speech, and yet if one were to try to refute him, there was nowhere to begin.

“Alright, His Highness Prince Ling has spoken his courteous words, pray take your leave now, there is still much we have to discuss with jiejie.” Mu Qing could not be impolite because of the other’s status as ambassador, but neither could he muster up any sort of amiable appearance.

“This is...” Yuwen Xuan eyed him dubiously, clearly not recognizing him, and it was not until an assistant came over and whispered in his ear that he seemed to light up with understanding. “Ah, so it is the little lord Mu. Please forgive my carelessness, you know, we Chu have always only heard of Princess Nihuang, and did not know about this lord Mu. Jiejie has fought all your wars for you, the little lord is fortunate indeed, what does he like to do in his spare time? Embroidery? It is a pity my younger sister did not come, embroidery is her favourite....”

Even the most sophisticated might not have been able to withstand this deliberate baiting, and so the young hot-blooded Mu Qing didn’t stand a chance, and he flushed with fury and jumped to his feet. His sister held him back.

“Your Highness Prince Ling is also unfamiliar to me,” Princess Nihuang said coolly. “Nihuang has never encountered so much as His Highness’ shadow on the battlefield, and if he does not go to war, perhaps he too spends his days amusing himself with embroidery?”

Yuwen Xuan laughed carelessly. “I have always been a pampered prince who spends his days idling about, so I do not go to war – what of it? But the little lord Mu is a lord who guards the border, and yet he has never appeared on the battlefield to fight under the banner of his king, if this is not fortune, what is? I must say, I do

envy him....”

Mu Qing couldn't contain his fury. He shoved off his sister's hand and rushed forward, drawing his sword and pointing it straight at Yuwen Xuan's throat as he shouted, “You listen to me, when I succeed to my father's place, of course I won't let my sister bear the burden for me. If you are a man, then prove yourself to have more than just a sharp tongue, and let us meet on the battlefield!”

“Hahaha,” Yuwen Xuan jeered, “So easily angered? Our two nations are currently arranging a wedding union, what cause for battle is there left? Even if we are so unfortunate as to enter into open war again in the future, I have already said that I myself will not be found on the battlefield, so we will let Lord Mu have his fierce words. As for whether I am a man...haha, I fear a little boy such as Lord Mu would not be able to tell....”

Princess Nihuang's brow furrowed. This Yuwen Xuan had a quick tongue, and was obviously trying to rile Mu Qing up, but aside from being designed to anger, there was nothing else offensive about his words. The best way to deal with people like him was to simply remain indifferent and ignore him, but Qing'er was young, and how could he be expected to keep his calm in the face of such ridicule? If she let this go on, she would find herself in a difficult bind – if she stopped Mu Qing, she would be encouraging the Chu's influence and extinguishing her brother's spirits; if she protected him, that would give this person yet another reason to tease Qing di for hiding under his sister's wing; yet, if she did nothing, she knew Qing di was not this person's match when it came to this game of words....

As she stood there deliberating, Xiao Jingrui stepped forward and said, smiling coldly, “Your Highness Prince Ling, since you already know that the two of you will have no opportunity to meet on the battlefield, then why waste time on these useless words? The little lord Mu has only just come of age and inherited his father's

position, and in the future, he is sure to be found under the royal flag in his own right. If you truly envy his place as general and commander of such a formidable army in the future, while you can only content yourself with embroidery, you have only to say so. I believe the little lord Mu would not deprive you of the chance to engage with him in person, I only do not know whether Your Highness Prince Ling would dare to accept such an invitation?”

Mu Qing gritted his teeth and added, “That’s right, keep your nonsense to yourself, what honour is there in provoking others with backhanded insults? You and I can fight, right here, right now, and if you don’t have the guts to fight me, call any of your men, call more than one if you like!”

Yan Yujin saw that Yuwen Xuan was slender in build and walked with a floating step, and it was evident that his martial arts training was far inferior to Mu Qing, who had been raised in a military household, and he understood that Xiao Jingrui meant to end this battle of wits where they were at a disadvantage, and neatly move the battleground to a physical fight, and so he jumped in to help. “We in Da Liang are of a different breed compared to those from your esteemed nation. We like to talk with our fists, and dislike empty words, the men in particular. Your Highness Prince Ling, you are in our country now, and ought to follow our customs, so perhaps you could spend less time spouting flowers from your lips, and put your money where your mouth is?”

Chapter 85: Nian Nian

Yuwen Xuan's gaze fell onto the two young people, and he looked them up and down for a moment before suddenly bursting into laughter, saying, "You people of Da Liang are real characters, you two look like elegant gentlemen of noble birth, where did you pick up the tempers of the Northern Yan – resorting to fists when words are not to your liking? I beg your pardon, you two are...."

His assistant immediately bent and whispered in his ear.

"Oh, so it is the Young Masters Xiao and Yan, what an honour, what an honour."

Xiao Jingrui and Yan Yujin were both on the Langya Lists, and so it was natural that Yuwen Xuan should know their names, but for some reason, the words "what an honour" coming from his mouth coupled with the expression on his face carried with it an undeniable sense of mocking.

"Do you dare fight me or not? If not, say so and be quick about it, no one likes listening to you sharpening your teeth," Mu Qing said angrily.

"Of course I dare, whyever would I not?" Yuwen Xuan's gaze turned suddenly cold, as he reached out a hand to stroke the pendant dangling from his cap. "But we are gathered here today to see the Princess off, and should this disintegrate into a fistfight, that would be disrespectful to the Princess. Everyone in my humble nation knows that I would dare to do anything, except offend a beautiful lady. And so, for today... even if the ladies and gentlemen present were to carve me into eight pieces, I would not lift a hand."

"If you don't dare face me, then say you don't dare, why be so long-winded about it?" Mu Qing glowered as he turned to pull at his sister. "Let's go up to the pavilion and ignore this person with a mouth but no guts."

“I have not finished speaking, why is the little lord Mu in such a hurry to leave? Is he afraid that, if he is not careful, I might accept the invitation?” Strangely, there was a wide smile on Yuwen Xuan’s face, and stranger yet, there was no hint of a smile in his steady gaze.

“Hunh,” Mu Qing glared at him. “You are really only a little skilled at provoking people with words, I’ve gotten used to it by now, so if you have no new moves to show, then I fear I will not linger long to keep your company.”

Seeing how quickly Mu Qing had controlled his emotions and stopped letting Yuwen Xuan rile him up as he pleased, the corner of Princess Nihuang’s lips lifted, and Xia Dong, who had stood by observing silently also nodded in approval. The masters Xiao and Yan were not by nature driven by their emotions, and they had only spoken up just now in Mu Qing’s place to lend a hand, and seeing that he had calmed down, they saw no reason to continue this pointless argument, and so turned away. Yuwen Xuan looked at one, then at another, and suddenly burst into laughter again. “Fascinating, how fascinating, do you all truly believe I cannot put my words into action? Although I will certainly not lift a hand today....” As he spoke, he turned his gaze onto Xiao Jingrui and smiled. “I have a friend who has long since admired the name of Master Xiao and would cherish this opportunity to learn from him, I wonder whether he would do us the honour?”

His attention had shifted so suddenly that everyone was a little taken aback. Yan Yujin cocked his head and stared at his friend. “When did you become so famous? Xia Dong jiejie is standing right here, but they didn’t challenge her, and chose to challenge you instead? Even if they win against you, what prestige could they gain?”

“You don’t get it,” Xia Dong glanced over and put a hand on Yan Yujin’s shoulder, saying with a smile, “Xiao Rui may not be on the Langya List of Martial Artists, but regardless he is still a master of

the first tier, so naturally there will be jianghu visitors of the second tier who are seeking to make a name for themselves by defeating him, what is so strange about that?”

“Oh...” Yan Yujin widened his eyes in understanding as he nodded. “Jianghu visitors of the second tier...that makes sense, it makes a lot of sense....”

As the challenged, Xiao Jingrui took this much more seriously than the other two, and he stepped forward slowly and said, his face solemn, “I am at your service.”

Yuwen Xuan gazed at him steadily for a moment, his smile disappearing abruptly, and his tone grew solemn as he answered, “Our thanks to Master Xiao.Nian Nian, Master Xiao has already accepted, come on out.”

There were eight others in total who had accompanied Prince Ling of Da Chu to the city gates, and from their attire, two were carriage drivers and five were guards. The last was dressed in a blue-green archer’s robe, a slender figure with a golden hoop in his hair and no other accessories except an exquisitely embroidered tassel around the waist, and from attire alone, it was impossible to guess at this person’s identity.

At first glance, this person appeared to have average features and a rather wooden expression, but as he stepped closer, Nihuang and Xia Dong, who had their share of jianghu experience, saw quickly that he wore a face mask of real human skin that hid his true features. Xiao Jingrui’s eyes narrowed, as if he too had noticed the abnormality.

With regards to human skin masks, no matter how intricately they were made, the material was still dead skin and could not replicate the delicate and subtle changes of a living person’s face, therefore it was very difficult to fool the truly observant. For this reason, since the creation of these masks, jianghu persons seldom used them, and when they did so, it was only as a sort of face veil

that was particularly difficult for enemies to remove, as if to say, “I don’t care that you can tell I’m wearing a mask, as long as you cannot see my true face.”

“Master Xiao, please.”

“Please.”

The two turned to face each other, unsheathed their swords, and took up a starting position as they bowed. Yan Yujin couldn’t help laughing. “Jingrui has always been one for manners, who could have guessed this Nian Nian would be just as concerned about etiquette?”

But Xia Dong and Nihuang exchanged a glance, their expressions serious.

Although it was only the simplest of positions, the two lady masters had already seen enough to guess at what kind of a person this challenger was.

After a moment of silence, a cacophony of clashes rang out as the two swords flashed in dazzling symphony, the two swordsmen exchanging blows so quickly that their figures grew blurred.

The swords flew through their air, their strength undeniable, each stroke brimming with qi, the weapons wielded so smoothly they seemed to be extensions of the swordsmen’s bodies, as if the swords themselves had spirits that had been awoken by this dance. The meeting of these spirits was not vicious in the least, but it stirred up an energy like a great wind sweeping through the observing crowd, and they felt their hairs stand up on end.

This was truly a competition, not a duel, not a fight to the death, but merely a contest between two schools of swordsmanship. The two competitors seemed to have a silent understanding, as neither made any moves with truly hostile intent, and yet both fought with every ounce of their ability. Every move was received with another in a dance so intricate it could have been choreographed,

and neither had the clear upper-hand. As the fight went on, even the observers couldn't help being drawn in, their expressions growing serious as they studied the leaping figures carefully.

Just as the climax of the fight had come abruptly, its end arrived just as swiftly. Xiao Jingrui's sword suddenly slowed, and he twisted his arm and turned, his brow furrowing, as his sword first flicked upwards in the 'Sky maneuver' and then erupted forward in the 'Fountain maneuver', and he descended upon his opponent like a celestial flood. His opponent faced the attack boldly, not to be outdone, and he grasped his sword in both hands as he redoubled his attack. To the onlooker's eye, just as the two swords flashed in the dazzling sunlight, the two blurred figures suddenly halted, like a song that had swelled to its climax only to stop abruptly. When the dust settled, it was Nian Nian who bowed first, and Xiao Jingrui immediately returned the bow, saying, "My thanks, you permitted me to win."

Nian Nian did not say anything for a long time, and although it was impossible to see his expression under his mask, his gaze was dazed, as if he was stunned. Yuwen Xuan hurried over, his face concerned, and put a hand on his back, asking lowly, "Nian Nian, are you hurt?"

Nian Nian shook his head gently and straightened to look at Xiao Jingrui for a long moment. When he finally spoke, his voice was as calm and pleasant as always. "Master Xiao is well-versed in the Tianquan method, and my training in the Eyun method is insufficient, so for today's battle, it is I who have lost to Master Xiao, and not the Eyun method that has proven inferior to Tianquan's. Please pass a message to your esteemed father – he must not forget his prior agreement. My master has arrived in Jinling, and will soon be at your door to pay a visit." When he finished speaking, he turned and walked away, his departure as clean as his arrival.

"May the Princess have a smooth journey, I will not tarry here

any longer, farewell!” Yuwen Xuan bowed, then gestured to his subordinates and followed after Nian Nian.

Xiao Jingrui gazed doubtfully after the shadows of the retreating figures, his expression sober. Yan Yujin scratched his head and mused thoughtfully, “The Eyun method? Could it be that this Nian Nian’s master is....”

“Yue Xiuze, one of the heads of the Chu emperor’s palace, and sixth-ranked on the Langya List of Martial Artists, or, I should say, now fifth-ranked....” Xia Dong tossed her head, dislodging the hair that had fallen over her face, her gaze grim.

“Isn’t Jindiao Chaiming of Da Yu ranked fifth?” Yan Yujin asked.

“I received the news a few days ago – about a month ago, Yue Xiuze dueled Chaiming and defeated him on the 79th move..... looks like he’s made quite a bit of progress in this short year.”

“He’s already beaten Chaiming, does that mean he’s going to go looking for Uncle Zhuo next?” Yan Yujin turned to look at his friend. “Jingrui, from what that person said, it sounds like Uncle Zhuo has some kind of old agreement with Yue Xiuze?”

Xiao Jingrui nodded. “My Zhuo dad has fought with Yue Xiuze twice before, and beaten him both times, but it’s not unlikely that they made some agreement to duel again in the future.”

Princess Nihuang murmured, “Yue Xiuze is a high-ranking official of Da Chu, but he did not show his identity this time when he entered the capital with the rest of the envoy, so it seems his purpose is truly detached from any official business, and he only seeks to challenge those martial arts experts who are ranked higher than he.”

Yan Yujin saw Xiao Jingrui’s somber expression and hit his arm, saying with a smile, “Uncle Zhuo has traveled jianghu for so many years, and he always received a dozen challenges in one year alone. This is our home ground, what can Yue Xiuze do to him? As long as

it's a fair fight, and the winner is determined by skill alone, there will be pride in victory, but no shame in loss either, so what are you so worried about?"

Xiao Jingrui smiled warmly at him. "I'm not worried, the Eyun method is not Tianquan Manor's match, our swordsmanship is always improving, and my Zhuo dad has not been sitting idle this year, so what do I have to be worried about? I was only thinking, if it's Yue Xiuze who is preparing to challenge my Zhuo dad, then why was that Master Nian Nian so eager to try his hand against me?"

"What's so strange about that?" Yan Yujin scoffed. "He is an heir of the Eyun method, and you are an heir of Tianquan Manor, and since his master is preparing to challenge your father, it's only natural that he was curious and wanted to test out the mettle of the Tianquan method for himself."

"I understand that, but if he wanted to try himself against the Tianquan method, why find me? By all rights, he should be looking for Qingyao dage, no?"

Yan Yujin looked confused, but Xia Dong, watching from one side, smiled and shook her head. "He was right to find you. I examined him carefully just now, and although that Nian Nian covered his true face, his bones have not yet grown fully, and his swordsmanship is still a little immature, he must be twenty years old at the most. I suppose he knew his own skill was not sufficient to challenge Zhuo Qingyao, and since our Master Jingrui is widely known not only for his reputable swordsmanship but also for his generous nature, who else could he find, if not you?"

Ni Huang sighed slowly. "But although this Miss Nian Nian is young, her skill is undeniable, and it looks as if Yue Xiuze has trained her well. It is too bad I must leave today, and cannot witness for myself the duel between Tianquan and Eyun. I can only entreat you all to write to me with the results."

Xia Dong grinned. “Of course.” Her gaze flickered to the side. “Hey, what are you youngsters gaping at? Didn’t you hear the Princess’ orders?”

Yan Yujin took several deep breaths and said, his eyes nearly bulging out of his sockets, “What did the Princess say just now? Miss.....Nian Nian?”

“That’s right,” Xia Dong cocked her head. “Didn’t you notice?”

Yan Yujin turned to Xiao Jingrui, dumbfounded. “Jingrui, did you notice?”

Although Xiao Jingrui did not give off a stupefied appearance, he was just as shocked as Yan Yujin, and at his question, he shook his head numbly. “I...I wasn’t paying attention....”

“Nevermind,” Mu Qing said consolingly. “I didn’t notice either.”

Yan Yujin eyed the little lord, clearly thinking, “of course you didn’t notice,” but as they weren’t too close, he swallowed these words and didn’t speak them out loud.

“Alright, the hour is late, the Princess ought to be leaving. It is said that one can escort a king a thousand miles, but in the end, he must still depart. Let us part ways here.” Xia Dong reached out and pinched Yan Yujin’s cheek out of habit, and then turned finally to Nihuang, saying lowly, “Princess, take care on the road.”

Xiao Jingrui heard her words and said apologetically, “We came to see the Princess off, and instead this turned into a pointless fight, and delayed the Princess’ journey, I’m so sorry.”

Princess Nihuang laughed brightly. “I am not in such a hurry that a little bit of time like this would make any difference, what is there to apologize about? Besides, the excitement of that fight makes for a good start to my journey.”

“Jiejie,” Mu Qing looked reluctant to let her go. “Since you want to see the duel between Tianquan and Eyun, why not stay a few more days before leaving?”

“What nonsense.” Although Princess Nihuang’s words were scolding, her gaze was warm as she reached out to caress her brother’s head. “I have reported my departure to His Majesty, how can I change it on a whim? Since I cannot watch myself, you will have to watch it for me, and that will be just as good.”

Yan Yujin laughed and pulled Mu Qing over to him, purposefully lightening the atmosphere as he said, “Then we will have to gang up on Jingrui! The fight between Yue Xiuze and Uncle Zhuo will be a private one, and if we don’t have Jingrui reporting back to us, who knows where or when it will happen!”

Xiao Jingrui answered seriously, “Only if my Zhuo dad gives his permission.”

Yan Yujin turned to him. “Never mind, I know you well, although Uncle Xie has always been strict with you, Uncle Zhuo treats you like a treasured jewel, so as long as you beg a little and throw a tantrum, I know he’ll agree to anything.”

During this distraction, Mu Qing had managed to get his emotions under control, and in order not to cause his sister worry or grief, he bravely gathered his spirits and smiled sweetly, “That’s true. I think it won’t be long before the Emperor lets me return to the South, so jiejie doesn’t need to worry.”

Nihuang smiled and patted her little brother on the shoulder, then gently brushed back the hair that had blown into his face. The iron will of the lady general held back the turmoil of emotions just beneath the surface, and she took a few steps back, and then turned and jumped onto her horse, a faint smile lingering at the edges of her lips.

“Yunnan is not the end of the world, until we meet again.”

And with a light echo of horse hooves, the caravan officially departed for Yunnan. Princess Nihuang turned for a last look at the capital, then turned her horse and nudged it gently into a trot, following the yellow road away from the city.

Chapter 86: Fei Liu

Mei Changsu sat in his gardens under the branches of a banyan tree heavy with greenery, playing a guessing game with Fei Liu as he listened to Tong Lu's report on the events that had occurred that day during the Princess' send-off. Aside from the mention of Yuwen Xuan's unexpected appearance, during which Mei Changsu appeared to be listening intently, he did not seem particularly interested in the rest of the report. As for Xiao Jingrui's competition with the Eyun disciple Nian Nian, he didn't even raise an eyebrow, only giving an absent "Ng" in answer.

Though on careful reflection, his attitude was not really that unusual. Neither Xiao Jingrui, nor that disciple of Yue Xiuze had much status in martial arts circles, and it was natural that competitions at this level would not be of much interest to Mister Mei of Jiangzuo, the chief of the world's greatest sect, who must have seen countless contests of this nature by now. If it were not for the fact that Xiao Jingrui was his friend, he probably would not even be interested in the result of the fight.

"Left!" Fei Liu shouted loudly, as he uncovered his eyes. Mei Changsu smiled and opened his left fist, which was empty. The youth's face screwed up immediately, and even Tong Lu, standing to the side, couldn't help laughing.

"Alright, you've lost three times, there must be a punishment. Go and help Aunt Ji cut the melons, Su gege wants to have a piece."

"Melons!" Fei Liu loved fruits, and as the season for tangerines had passed, he had moved on to melons. Mei Changsu often teased that he could finish a whole field of them in a day, and to prevent him from getting sick, he had to pose a limit on the number of melons the youth was allowed to have each day.

Fei Liu darted away, and Mei Changsu's smile disappeared. His tone was cool when he spoke again: "Inform Mister Shisan, it is

time to make a move against the Crimson Sleeves. He may initiate the first step, and it must be done cleanly.”

“Yes.” Tong Lu bowed hurriedly. “Does the Chief have any other orders?”

Mei Changsu leaned down and rested his head on the pillow, closing his eyes. “You do not need to come tomorrow....”

Tong Lu paled abruptly and fell to the floor in a bow, saying in a trembling voice, “Has Tong Lu.....disappointed the Chief in some way?”

Mei Changsu, startled by his reaction, turned his head to look at him. “I was just going to let you take a day off, where have your thoughts got to?”

“Ah?” Tong Lu let out a sigh of relief and sat up, scratching his head. “I thought the Chief was telling me not to come again in the future.....it wasn’t easy earning this opportunity to work directly for the Chief, and Tong Lu would be sad to see it go....”

“Silly child,” Mei Changsu couldn’t help smiling as he patted his head. “Actually, it is I who needs a good day’s rest, without anything to think or worry about.... I want to put aside all troubles and spend a day in serenity and peace, and gather my strength for the days ahead....”

Tong Lu didn’t understand the importance of the days to come, but he was not overly curious by nature and knew when to hold his tongue, so he did not ask further, and only continued to gaze reverently at his chief, waiting quietly for his orders.

“Tell Gong Yu, she must rest well tomorrow too....”

“Yes.”

“There’s nothing else, you may leave.”

Tong Lu bowed deeply, and then got up and left. Li Gang entered in his wake, holding a large platter with a lid tied shut with red

cloth.

“Chief, it’s arrived, here it is for your inspection.”

Mei Changsu sat up and untied the red cloth. On the platter stood a small bottle carved out of dark green jade. At first glance, it did not catch the eye, but on closer inspection, there were running horses carved into the surface of the jade , racing with carefree abandon along the natural pattern of the jade itself. The design was so intricate and the handiwork so delicate and refined that the overall piece was astonishing to behold.

And yet, no matter how beautiful the jade bottle itself appeared, its greatest value lay inside.

“How many?”

“Chief, there are ten.”

Mei Changsu picked up the jade bottle and removed its cork stopper, then lifted it to his nose and sniffed it lightly before replacing the cork and turning the bottle over in his hands gently.

Li Gang’s gaze shifted, as if he was trying to decide whether to speak or not.

“Li dage, if you have anything to say, please say it freely.” Mei Changsu had not even lifted his head, and it was impossible to know how he had seen Li Gang’s expression.

“Chief, would this gift be a little too much?” Li Gang spoke softly. “A jade bottle hand-carved by Great Master Huo, heart protection pills that can save a person’s life – either one of these gifts would be enough to astound any audience, why put the two together?”

Mei Changsu was quiet for awhile, and there was grief and compassion in his gaze when he finally answered, “After this birthday, I fear that even gifts more precious than these would not hold any meaning for Jingrui....”

Li Gang lowered his head, biting his lip.

“But you are correct, if we send him a gift like this, it would indeed be a little too ostentatious. I have been thoughtless in my consideration.” Mei Changsu’s finger traced the surface of the jade as he sighed lightly. “Put the pills into a plain bottle.”

“Yes.”

The jade bottle was replaced onto the platter, but Mei Changsu’s gaze still lingered on the carving of the sprinting horses. Finally, he looked away, and then closed his eyes. When he first chose this jade bottle, it was because of this carving, because he knew that Jingrui had loved horses since he was a boy and so would like the design, and thus he had forgotten all along its staggering cost.

It would appear that his heart, which he had thought as calm as a still pond, was not immune to slight ripples in its surface, especially as that day drew closer and closer.

“Li dage, bring me my zither....”

“Yes.”

Li Gang, who had been watching Mei Changsu’s every expression with concern, retreated quickly with the platter and returned almost immediately carrying wooden zither, which he placed carefully on a small table under the window.

The table was low, and there was no chair before it, only a thin mat. Mei Changsu sat down cross-legged and tuned the instrument. Then his finger tips skipped lightly over the strings, and a soft melody drifted through the air, gentle as water flowing down a stream – ‘The Joy of Peace and Tranquility’.

The music soothed the hearts of all who listened, even of the musician himself. The tune sang of winding brooks in sunlit forests, and open valleys filled with wildflowers. It cleansed the soul of grief, and wiped the brow of sorrow. When the music stopped, there was no trace of disturbance left on his face, and his eyes were as peaceful as a lake on a windless day, his gaze clear and

steady.

The decision had been made long ago, and there was no use in wavering now. His sympathy and regret for Xiao Jingrui could not change the plans that had been laid, and so any sorrow that remained was meaningless, even hypocritical, and no matter whether it was for himself or for that young man, it held no practical purpose.

Mei Changsu lifted his face and took a deep breath. The warm spring sunshine fell onto his face, but he felt no warmth, only a sort of distant coolness.

He lifted a hand and placed it in the sunlight. A little pale, almost transparent, and weak, without any strength.

These hands had once tamed horses and wielded swords, had once bent a bow to shoot down great birds of prey. And now, they had abandoned the reins, and relinquished the bows, and could only sit in this dim inferno, stirring the winds.

“Li dage,” Mei Changsu turned his head and looked at Li Gang, standing silently by the door. “I am sorry, I have caused you worry....”

Li Gang felt a sudden painful warmth well up in his chest, and he could barely control the tremor in his voice as he answered, “Chief....”

“Go and tell Fei Liu to come, how can cutting a melon take so long....” Mei Changsu did not appear to have noticed his loss of composure, and only cocked his head, smiling faintly.

Almost before he had finished speaking, Fei Liu’s slender figure bounded into the courtyard and he streaked into the room, a small white dish in one hand as he said loudly, “Flower!”

Mei Changsu turned and looked. Five flowers carved out of melon rested in the dish, and though the petals were uneven and the handiwork a bit shoddy, the shape was unmistakable, and was

really quite pretty.

“Did Fei Liu carve this?”

“Ng!” Fei Liu’s eyes were wide and he looked delighted. “Best!”

“You picked the five best flowers to bring here?” Mei Changsu’s gaze was fond as he twisted the youth’s ear gently. “Did Aunt Ji teach you?”

“Ng!” Fei Liu nodded emphatically.

“Can I eat them?”

“Eat!” Fei Liu grabbed the largest flower and brought it to Mei Changsu’s lips.

Li Gang couldn’t help laughing. “Hey Fei Liu, since they’re to be eaten anyway, why did you go to so much trouble carving them into flowers?”

“Su gege eat!” Fei Liu said firmly, glaring at him.

“Our Fei Liu is so good, he wanted to make them beautiful because they were for Su gege to eat, is that right?” Mei Changsu bit off a petal, and reached out with his handkerchief to wipe at the youth’s mouth. “How much did you eat? There’s melon juice all over your chin....”

“Carved badly!” Fei Liu said defensively.

“You only ate the ones you carved badly? That’s alright then. But you must remember not to eat too many all at once, or your stomach will hurt.”

“Ng!”

Mei Changsu finished the first flower, and then shook his head at Fei Liu. The youth remembered that eating too much would make one’s stomach hurt, and so did not try to feed him a second piece. He stared blankly at the plate for a moment, and then seemed to make up his mind, and brought the remaining four flowers to Li Gang.

“For me?” Li Gang laughed loudly. “What favour, I’m so honoured, so honoured indeed!”

Fei Liu didn’t understand half of what he said, but he understood the first question and nodded his answer. But when Li Gang picked up a piece of melon, his eyes, the only part of him that showed any emotion, looked longingly at the melon, as if he was unwilling to part with it.

“You eat as well, we can have half each.” The innocent child’s feelings were written on his face, and Li Gang held back a smile as he pushed two of the flowers back towards Fei Liu.

Fei Liu turned his head to look at Mei Changsu.

“Just now in the kitchen, how many melons did you carve badly?”

“Three!”

“Did you eat them all?!”

“With Aunt Ji!”

Mei Changsu looked at Fei Liu, his expression stern. “Didn’t you promise Su gege to only eat one a day?”

“Carved badly!” Fei Liu’s mouth turned down, his expression clearly looking wronged.

“Ng...” Mei Changsu thought seriously for a moment. “Then we cannot blame our Fei Liu, it is Su gege who was not clear enough. From now on, no matter whether it was carved badly or cut wrongly, as long as it is melon, then Fei Liu can only eat one per day. Understood?”

Fei Liu’s handsome face still did not show any strong emotion, but his tone clearly conveyed his unhappiness. “So little!”

“Su gege is afraid Fei Liu will get sick.” Mei Changsu glanced at him, his smile a little wicked. “How about we call Lin Chen gege to come over?”

Fei Liu jumped in fear and buried his head in Mei Changsu's chest, his arms going tightly around his waist, and refused to let go. Li Gang, who had already been shaking with suppressed laughter, completely gave up at this display and retreated outdoors, clutching his side helplessly.

"You haven't answered me." Mei Changsu showed remarkable restraint as he extracted the youth's head from his embrace, and repeated sternly, "One?"

Fei Liu was visibly torn between Lin Chen gege on the one hand and melons on the other, and finally, he lowered his head meekly. "One...."

Mei Changsu ruffled Fei Liu's hair, his gaze and smile as warm as always.

Li Gang had disappeared from the courtyard. The earnest and devoted assistant had gone to find a suitable bottle to hold the pills which were to be a gift. Just now, the grief had been lifted by the adorable youth's appearance, but a few ripples still remained nevertheless, a faint pain underneath that resurfaced on occasion. In the space between breaths, he pushed the pain away firmly, burying it deep down.

In another day's time, it would be Xiao Jingrui's twenty-fifth birthday.

Mei Changsu knew very well that, for this young nobleman, it would be the most unforgettable day of his life....

Book 5: Grudges and Grievances

Chapter 87: Arriving Guests

To most people, the first hour of dusk marked the end of a hard day's work. But to the inhabitants of the normally bustling and brightly-lit Spiral Market Street, dusk was only the beginning – a time to rouse oneself from a lethargic slumber and begin to clean and prepare the halls to receive the first guests of the evening. The entire street was quiet, and every window and door was still barred shut, its silence so complete that it was almost impossible to associate this place with the frantic energy and gaudy celebrations that took place here after dark.

It was through these deserted streets that a small carriage with a jeweled canopy made its way quietly, pulled by a beautiful white horse, on which sat a handsome young nobleman dressed in fine splendor, smiling brightly. From his expression, you could never have guessed that he was riding through empty streets. He looked instead as if he was sitting in Crimson Sleeve House on one of its busiest evenings.

The crisp hoof-beats rang through the air, and the small carriage and the handsome young man rode past many extravagantly decorated gates before halting at the side-door of Miaoyin House. The carriage-driver jumped down and knocked three times on the door, and a moment later, a serving-girl answered. She took in the visitors at a glance and then disappeared again without a word. The carriage-driver and the nobleman waited patiently. A short while later, the door opened again, and a young lady, covered head to toe in a veil of light gauze, came forward slowly on the arm of the serving-girl. Although her features were blurred by the veil, it was obvious from her graceful figure and delicate steps that this was a beauty to stir the hearts of anyone who looked upon her.

The splendidly-dressed young man had already leaped down from his horse and was coming forward in a bow, as he said with a bright smile, “Miss Gong Yu is truly a lady of her word. To have

Miss as a guest at Jingrui's birthday banquet, we will be the envy of the city!"

"Master Yan is too kind." Gong Yu's voice was gentle. "The young master has come personally, I am not worthy of the honour."

"A chance to escort such a beautiful lady, naturally I fought for the privilege," Yan Yujin answered, delighted. "Jingrui is the birthday boy, so of course he couldn't get away, and Xie Bi has to help receive guests and manage the household staff, so even if he wanted to come, he wouldn't dare voice the thought. As for anyone else, Miss Gong Yu would not know him well, so who could win against my claim?"

Gong Yu lifted a hand to cover her smile. "Master Yan is as witty as always...."

Yan Yujin smiled back and turned towards the road. "The carriage is prepared, is Miss ready to leave?"

Gong Yu spoke lowly to the serving-girl, and then stepped forward and entered the carriage. The serving-girl bowed and returned indoors.

"She's not going?"

"I am attending Master Xiao's birthday banquet, what need have I to bring her?"

Yan Yujin thought for a moment and then nodded. "That's true, once we arrive at the Xie residence, there will be no shortage of girls to serve you.If Miss is seated, we will prepare to depart. Although there is more than an hour before the banquet is to start, there will be elders present, so it is best for us to arrive early."

"Yes, we may depart."

At this soft reply, the carriage driver cracked his whip, and under the accompaniment of the elegantly-dressed young man, the carriage began to move forward.

At the same time, the Xie residence of the Marquis of Ning was busy preparing for the birthday banquet of their First Young Master.

Because Xiao Jingrui was the son of two families, his birthday celebration undoubtedly held a certain significance that had nothing to do with him personally. And thus, neither Zhuo Dingfeng, who had always doted on him, nor the usually stern Xie Yu had ever commented on the special treatment Xiao Jingrui received every year on his birthday.

The guest list had been prepared long ago, and when it was first presented to Xie Yu, his gaze had stopped momentarily at the words 'Su Zhe', but he did not say anything. Although they served different masters, Xie Yu did not intend to obstruct the relationship between his son and this strategist of Prince Yu's. This was because he knew very well that the information Xiao Jingrui possessed was very limited, and even if it was all seized by Su Zhe, it would still not matter much. Besides, Xiao Jingrui's friendship with Su Zhe might one day be put to good use, and even if it was not, it did not do much harm.

And so, his only response to this list, which included an enemy's strategist as well as a lady from a pleasure house, was, "Let your mother have a look."

As Xie Yu had not expressed disapproval, the quiet and composed Grand Princess Liyang, who kept a low profile, naturally did not express any opinion either, and so the invitations were sent out without any issue.

Xiao Jingrui had a number of rowdy but good-natured friends, and last year, after the elders had retired, the crowd had gathered together amusing itself late into the night, making good use of this excuse for entertainment. But this year, Mei Changsu was coming, and Gong Yu, who never left her House to perform, would also be there, and so Xiao Jingrui was planning this year's banquet much more carefully than he had in the past, so that it would not

dissolve into the kind of cacophonous, unrestrained partying that it had become in previous years. But if he suddenly stopped inviting friends he had been inviting for the past few years, that would undoubtedly cause offense, and the dilemma occupied him for many days. Yan Yujin saw his predicament and thought of a solution. He could say that his parents had instructed him to make this year's banquet elegant in nature, and that the evening would be filled with reciting poetry and listening to the zither. As he feared this would dampen everyone's mood, he would instead reserve the largest and best restaurant in the capital for the day before his birthday, and invite a dozen of the most beautiful ladies to entertain his friends for a day. This crowd of young noblemen were indeed satisfied by this day of amusement, and voluntarily declined to attend the following evening's "elegant and refined" banquet, and so Xiao Jingrui's dilemma was neatly resolved.

Thus, on the evening of the twelfth of April, there were not too many guests attending Xiao Jingrui's birthday banquet. Originally, the invited included only Mei Changsu, Xia Dong, Yan Yujin, and Gong Yu, not including family. But when he had gone to deliver his invitation to the Su Manor, Meng Zhi happened to be there, and the Commander had teased, "Jingrui, why aren't you inviting me?" and so the Young Master Xiao of course immediately produced a second invitation for this esteemed guest.

Although there were not many people, there was still much to prepare. The women were preoccupied with the decoration of the dining hall and managing the servants, and had left the arrangement of goods and supplies to Xie Bi, and so as soon as the Second Master Xie had a moment's respite, he went to his dage to complain, "Why am I working myself to death over here while you sit around idly on your birthday? No fair, you've got to give me half your presents in exchange!"

"You're my flesh-and-blood brother, why talk about exchange? If you like anything of mine, it's yours." Young Master Xiao's calm

reply took all the wind from Xie Bi's sails, and he even added casually, "Mum and Mother are looking for you, something about the banquet menu. You take your time with all the work, don't let me delay you...."

As the birthday boy ducked out the door, Xie Bi could only stand there kicking at the ground sullenly, before he gave up and returned to his work.

That night, the first to arrive were of course Yan Yujin and Gong Yu. As soon as he saw Xiao Jingrui hurrying out to receive them, the son of the Imperial Uncle bent his head and whispered in the beautiful lady's ear, "I am borrowing your spotlight today, usually when I come to the Xie manor, Jingrui never comes out to receive me, and I have to go and find him all by myself...."

Just as he had predicted, the first words out of Xiao Jingrui's mouth were: "Miss Gong Yu has graced us with her arrival, forgive Jingrui for not coming out to meet you. Please, come in."

"Hey," Yan Yujin eyed him coldly, "can you see me?"

"Yes, yes, yes," Xiao Jingrui said soothingly, "Master Yan, please come in as well."

"You haven't said 'forgive me for not coming out to meet you'...."

"Ah yes, forgive me for not coming out to meet Master Yan as well. Should your humble servant carry Your Honour in on his back?"

"No need. Just give me your arm."

Gong Yu couldn't help laughing, and she said with a shake of her head, "You two.....are truly a pair of good friends...."

"That's because I let him have his way. Otherwise, we would have come to blows long ago," Yan Yujin said with a straight face. "If anyone wants to see a paragon of patience and tolerance, tell them to come to me...."

“Either come in or get lost!” Xiao Jingrui scolded with a smile. “Or do you want Miss Gong Yu to keep standing here while you let your mouth run?”

Yan Yujin hurriedly bowed to her and said in a singsong voice, “Aiya, it is this humble one’s fault, pray enter, Miss, and enter quickly....”

“Sober up, the show hasn’t even started, and you’re already singing.” Xiao Jingrui rolled his eyes and led Gong Yu into the reception pavilion. He served her some tea, and after a little while, suggested that he bring her in to meet the women of the household.

By this time, Gong Yu had removed her veil, revealing brilliant yellow robes. Her face was not powdered or made up, but this only served to emphasize a certain lovely grace in her appearance. At Xiao Jingrui’s invitation, she solemnly knelt in a bow and said quietly, “Although Gong Yu has had the honour of being invited tonight, I am nonetheless only an entertainer, here to provide music for the noble gentleman at his esteemed residence. How could Gong Yu dare to meet such respectable persons as Her Highness the Grand Princess?”

Yan Yujin’s brow furrowed and he was about to speak when Xiao Jingrui beat him to it, saying warmly, “This is a private gathering, and Miss does not need to be too concerned. Besides, my mum and Qingyi mei are of jianghu background, and so are not very formal, and Xie Qi meimei is also open-minded by nature. Although my mother is a little aloof, she has never been arrogant, and besides, she loves music, and has known Miss Gong Yu’s name for some time. She asked me long ago to bring you to meet her as soon as you arrived.”

At his earnest words, Gong Yu could not refuse any longer, and so she thanked him and followed as he led the way further into the manor. Yan Yujin had no excuse to follow them, and so he could only stay in the reception pavilion, wandering around idly.

Fortunately, Xiao Jingrui returned to find him soon after with Gong Yu nowhere in sight – clearly she had been invited to stay in the inner courtyard.

After chatting for a few minutes, Yan Yujin saw that the time was drawing near, and he was just about to ask when he saw Xie Bi hurrying over, shouting as he came, “Dage, come quick, Commander Meng is here.”

The two rose quickly and hurried outside. Because Meng Zhi was one of Xie Yu’s colleagues in the court, with an important position, the servants had first gone to notify the Old Master, and so by the time Xiao Jingrui arrived, Xie Yu and Zhuo Dingfeng were already there welcoming Meng Zhi in the entrance hall.

Xiao Jingrui didn’t dare disturb his elders so he stood quietly to one side, and, seeing a pause in the conversation, he was about to go forward to pay his greetings when another cry came from outside the gates: “Su Zhe, Mister Su, has arrived....”

The people in the entrance hall turned, and Xiao Jingrui was about to walk outside when Mei Changsu, a faint smile on his lips, appeared before him. Tonight, he was dressed in a snowy white cloak over sky-blue robes, and by his complexion, he looked very well indeed. It was difficult to imagine from his refined, scholarly appearance that so many of the ripples and waves experienced by the capital this past year could trace their origins to his hand.

With one calm glance, Mei Changsu had already taken in the situation in the entrance hall. In keeping with custom, he first bowed to Xie Yu, saying, “I greet the Marquis.”

“The presence of the gentleman brings light to my humble dwelling, it is our honour to have you attending our son’s little celebration,” Xie Yu answered courteously. He gestured to the man beside him, “This is Zhuo Dingfeng, Chief Zhuo.”

Mei Changsu smiled. “Chief Zhuo and I have met a few times before, but have not had the opportunity to converse. What

fortune to meet again on this joyous occasion.”

“Chief Mei is too kind. I have admired you for a long time, it is an honour to meet you at last.” Zhuo Dingfeng clasped his fists to his chest and bowed, returning the appropriate greeting for someone of equal rank. The two young persons standing beside them felt their pulses speed up, as they suddenly realized that, in their familiarity with Brother Su, they had gradually begun to forget his formidable position in the jianghu world.

Mei Changsu and Meng Zhi exchanged greetings as well, and the small crowd stood there exchanging pleasantries for some time. Yan Yujin was growing impatient, but as these were all elders, he didn't dare leave, and could only stand to one side, thinking to himself that he should not have followed Xiao Jingrui out, and that Xie Bi had been much smarter about all of this....

Fortunately, the pleasantries soon came to an end. Xie Yu, as host, and Zhuo Dingfeng, as half a host, escorted the two esteemed guests to the main hall for tea, and naturally Xiao Jingrui followed closely. But Yan Yujin seized the opportunity and, like Fei Liu who had only appeared at the gates for an instant, soon disappeared off to who knew where.

Chapter 88: A Test of Swords

The Xie manor was both the residence of a first-ranked marquis as well as the imperial residence of the Emperor's brother-in-law, and so it was even grander than the manors of other officials of similar ranking. Aside from the usual facilities such as the meeting hall, the guest hall, the reception pavilion, and the side hall, there was also a pavilion beside the lake separating the inner and outer courtyards, called the Rain-Chime Hall. There would be a moderate number of guests arriving for today, and so Grand Princess Liyang purposely chose to hold Xiao Jingrui's birthday banquet in this hall.

When the last guest, Xia Dong, had arrived, Xie Yu sent messengers to inform the women in the inner courtyard and led his guests to Rain-Chime Hall. Almost everyone there knew each other from regular encounters, and it was only Mistress Zhuo who was not familiar with many of the guests, and so the time spent on greetings did not last long, and soon, everyone was standing at his or her place.

Because it was a private banquet, the seating arrangement was not too formal. The Xie couple took the host's position, with Zhuo Dingfeng and his wife beside them. Xia Dong and Meng Zhi spent a long time politely declining the right-most guest's seat until Meng Zhi, who was senior in age, finally took the honoured position, with Xia Dong across from him. On Meng Zhi's right was Mei Changsu, and on Xia Dong's right was Yan Yujin. In order to avoid Xia Dong jieje's habit of pinching his cheek, Yan Yujin carefully moved his seat backwards by about a foot. The rest of the young people took their places according to their respective ranks and seniority, although Gong Yu insisted on taking the last seat, and no one could convince her otherwise. Zhuo Qingyi, who liked this jieje very much, took the seat beside her at the same table. Xiao Jingrui looked around for Fei Liu, meaning to find a place for him,

but there was no shadow of the youth anywhere in sight. Mei Changsu smilingly told him not to bother.

Today, the birthday boy was wearing a brand new robe handmade by Mistress Zhuo. Although the craftsmanship of a jianghu woman warrior could not compare to that of a true seamstress, the care and love she had put into her work was evident. The collar and sleeves were traced with delicate circular patterns, the hem was lined in gold thread, and the waist was decorated with jade pendants and pearls. It was fortunate that Xiao Jingrui naturally had a bright and scholarly air, and so even in all this finery, he still managed not to look like the typical spoiled son of a rich noble family. Still, the first time Yan Yujin saw him trying on the robe, he commented tactfully, “Jingrui, when I see you willingly put on something like this, I know you are truly a filial son.”

Before the banquet began, the presents were brought forward. His elders gifted him with clothing and shoes, Zhuo Qingyao and his wife gave him a jade flute, Xie Bi’s gift was a high-quality ink stone, and Zhuo Qingyi had handmade a new tassel for his sword. Yan Yijin gave him an exquisite new harness, Xia Dong and Meng Zhi both brought elegant new playthings, and Gong Yu’s gift was an elaborately embroidered standing screen.

Slipped in with this set of gifts, Mei Changsu’s heart-protection pills did not draw much attention initially, and if Yan Yujin had not peered over curiously and then exclaimed loudly in astonishment, the others likely would not have noticed what a precious gift he had brought.

“No fair, no fair, Brother Su is too biased, such a wonderful gift is wasted on Jingrui! You’ve never given me anything like this, and you clearly like me better!”

As Yan Yujin protested laughingly, a jade hand reached over from the side and unerringly grasped the thickest part of his cheek, giving it an expert twist, and his face flushed immediately.

“What are you fussing about? It’s not the middle of July yet, is it? Who’s to say Mister Su won’t give you something good when the time comes?” Xia Dong laughed.

The son of the Imperial Uncle clutched his face as he said resentfully, “My birthday isn’t the middle of July, it’s the seventh of July, Xia Dong jiejie, don’t get it wrong!”

“Oh, the Double Seventh...” Xia Dong glanced over at him. “Well, it’s not that different from the middle of July, what are you getting all worked up for?”

Yan Yujin glared at her balefully. Please, dajie, the Double Seventh and the middle of July are vastly different not only in date, but also in meaning....

“Alright, alright,” Xie Bi intervened with a smile. “You really will fight about anything. Heart protection pills may be rare, but they’re not meant to be taken every day. One day if you find yourself spitting up blood or running out of breath, I’m sure dage will give you a pill....”

Yan Yujin immediately turned his furious gaze onto the Xie second brother. You’ll be the one spitting up blood and running out of breath!

With this little quarrel between the younger ones, the reserved atmosphere of the banquet finally loosened up a little, and even Grand Princess Liyang was smiling as she said, “Yujin used to come crying to me saying you two were bullying him, and I didn’t believe him, but from today, it really seems as if you do like to bully him....”

“Alright,” Xie Yu was smiling as well. “How can you treat guests like this, Rui’er, come and pour wine for everyone.”

Xiao Jingrui stood and picked up a silver and black flask, pouring from it until everyone’s wine cups were filled. Xie Yu lifted his cup, bowed to everyone, and said, “We have troubled you all to attend

our son's humble little celebration, it is an honour. I lift this cup as a tribute to you, please accept this offer of my respect." He raised the cup to his lips and drained it in one go. Everyone followed his example, but Mei Changsu only touched the cup to his lips before putting it down. Xiao Jingrui knew his health was poor and so did not insist, and instead quietly ordered a servant to bring hot tea.

"Come, come, this is a private banquet, there is no need to stand on courtesy. I have never been a very capable host, so please feel free to consider yourselves at home, and do as you please." Xie Yu laughed, then gestured to a servant to begin bringing in the dishes as he sat down at his place.

After a few rounds of wine, Xia Dong brushed her hair back behind her ears, propped her chin on one hand and turned slightly misty eyes towards her host, as she said, "Marquis Xie said we should consider ourselves at home, was this a true statement?"

"Certainly, it was the truth. What does Officer Xia mean by this question?"

"I only wanted to be sure." There was a sweet but impish smile on Xia Dong's face as she said lightly, "In my home, I am often willful and impetuous, I trust the Marquis will not take offense at any rude impulses of mine?"

Xie Yu laughed loudly as he answered, "Xia Dong has always had the temperament of a boy, how could I take any offense?"

"Good." The corner of Xia Dong's mouth curled as she nodded slowly, her mischievous smile suddenly turning cold as ice as her gaze swept past Xie Yu and halted on Zhuo Dingfeng sitting beside him. Her voice rang out in the hall as she said, "Xia Dong has long admired Chief Zhuo's martial skill, it is our fortune to meet today, and I request an opportunity to learn from him."

As the cold words left her lips, Xia Dong leapt into the air, a chopstick held in her hand like a sword, and plummeted straight for Zhuo Dingfeng's throat.

This abrupt change of mood left everyone staring blankly, and before they could react, the two were already exchanging blows. Although they were only using chopsticks as swords, each stroke was dealt ferociously, and the wind that had whipped up in their wake was stealing the breath of the spectators.

By this time, more than ten strokes had been dealt. Xia Dong threw herself back and ended the fight as suddenly as it had begun. She lifted a hand to smooth the hair at her forehead until it lay flat again, and her robes settled down around her once more.

To most of the spectators, Xia Dong looked no different from her usual appearance, and only a very few present saw the hint of confusion that flashed across her eyes.

A cold smile drifted across the lips of Xie Yu, the Marquis of Ning.

Xia Dong was truly a person of dedication. The case of the murdered guards had already cooled, but she herself had not given up the investigation. But of course, since he had dared to invite her here today, he had certainly made the necessary preparations, and if this lady Xuanjing Officer wanted to compare Zhuo Dingfeng's martial arts with the wounds inflicted on the dead guards, he feared it would not be so easy.

“How exciting!” Meng Zhi was the first to break the silence. “Although only a dozen strokes were exchanged, the moves were exquisite to behold, and the inner strength and swordsmanship of each competitor was obvious, it is truly my fortune to witness this today.”

Xia Dong smiled. “Fighting before Commander Meng, this must look like child's play to you.”

Zhuo Dingfeng added modestly, “Officer Xia was too kind, in another few strokes, she would have had me begging for mercy.”

“Where experts cross swords, wine must follow, come, let us

drink another round.” Xie Yu took up the flask and filled a cup himself, then brought it to Xia Dong, seemingly wanting to put an end to the action that had begun so abruptly. Xia Dong stared at him unmoving for a long moment, and then slowly lifted a hand and accepted the cup, lifting her head and draining it in one go.

Zhuo Qingyao came over with his wife and raised his fists in a salute. “Officer Xia is truly formidable. Let me take this opportunity to raise a cup to you, and if we meet again in jianghu, I pray you will do me the honour.”

Xia Dong smiled but didn’t say anything as she accepted the cup. Xie Bi and Zhuo Qingyi, under the subtle urging of their elders, also came over to lift their cups in respect, and even Mistress Zhuo accompanied her husband forward as they raised a second cup in toast. Yan Yujin, who was talking quietly with Xiao Jingrui in a corner, thought this was a bit strange, and asked him in a quiet voice, “What are they doing? Are they trying to get her drunk?”

Xiao Jingrui answered in a voice just as low, “I rarely see Xia Dong jieje drinking, how is her tolerance? Should I go and drink a few in her place?”

“I seldom see her drinking too...look, her face is all red, you had better go and take a few for her, I’m afraid she’ll come torture me when she’s drunk....”

Meng Zhi, who was walking past them, couldn’t help smiling when he overheard these words and turned his head to reassure them. “Don’t worry, Xia Dong’s face gets red like this after a single cup, but even after a thousand cups, she will still only suffer from a red face.....what were you two discussing just now?”

“Not discussing, I was just reminding Jingrui, this is the perfect time to ask Miss Gong Yu to serenade us with her music.” As Yan Yujin spoke, he turned his gaze towards Gong Yu, who was sitting quietly to the side, and when she lifted her head to return his gaze, his face immediately broke out in a huge grin.

Xiao Jingrui laughed as he kicked him gently with one foot. "Alright, wipe the drool of your face, I'll go and ask Mother." Just as he was about to get up, he saw the Grand Princess' personal attendant hurrying over to Xie Yu's side and whispering something in his ear. Xie Yu nodded and then turned to the crowd and said in a loud, clear voice, "There can be no feast without music, and as we have Miss Gong Yu of Miaoyin House here with us today, shall we not invite her to play for us, and cleanse away our worries and burdens with her elegant music?"

His suggestion was met with enthusiastic agreement. Gong Yu stood up slowly and bowed, then said in a gentle voice, "The Marquis is too kind. Gong Yu has no talent, but she will do her best."

A serving girl hurried over and set down a zither and a stool. Xiao Jingrui glanced over and recognized it for a particularly treasured instrument of his mother's, which even her children were not allowed to use normally. If she was willing to bring it out today for a stranger to use, that showed that she admired Gong Yu's skill very much indeed.

As a gifted musician, although Gong Yu could not have known that this was the Grand Princess Liyang's most treasured instrument, she was of course even more astute than Xiao Jingrui when it came to appreciating the worth of this zither, and after she had sat down and examined it for a few moments, she stood up again and knelt down in a bow to the Grand Princess.

Grand Princess Liyang's expression was as cool as always, but from her slight bow back, one could see the extraordinary courtesy this sister of the Emperor was willing to show Gong Yu, and even Xie Yu, who knew his wife's nature very well, was astounded.

After she had sat down once more, Gong Yu lifted one hand slowly and tested a few notes. The pitch was perfect, and the notes rich and golden in the cool evening air. The jade fingers fluttered delicately, and the winding melody of the famous composition,

‘Phoenix Seeking Phoenix’, drifted through the room. Usually, musicians strove to match their performances with the mood of their environment, but for talents like Gong Yu, no one cared about such trivialities. And therefore, no one seemed surprised that she had chosen such a passionate piece for a birthday banquet. As the song rose into the night, it painted the picture of a golden phoenix soaring over the ocean, questing over the seas for its companion, its wings spread wide as it glided over the wind. It stirred up a fierce sense of longing in its audience, and before the song was over, many were staring silently, caught up in its trance.

Although Xie Yu was an educated man, he knew little about music, and at most thought the song was beautiful and pleasant to the ear, but did not understand the mystery of its appeal. But when he turned and saw the look in his wife’s face, and the shine of tears in her eyes, an unhappiness stirred in his heart. When the song was over, he coughed lightly and said, “Miss Gong Yu’s talent is truly unparalleled. But this is a joyous occasion, pray favour us with a happier selection.”

Gong Yu murmured, “Yes,” and began playing once more. A bright, quick tune emerged this time, the well-known ‘Fisherman’s Song’. The melody was light and the notes playful, and it seemed to its audience as if they stood in the warm glow of the setting sun as fishing boats docked after a hard day’s work, the fishermen singing cheerfully together as they drew in their nets. Even to someone who could not appreciate the finer nuances of music, the joy within the music was unmistakable. But Xie Yu was not paying attention to this. Instead he sat listening quietly, keeping one eye on Princess Liyang’s face. Only when he saw the furrow in her brow relax and a small smile spread across her lips did he finally let out a sigh of relief.

Applause and shouts of praise broke out when the song finished. Yan Yujin waved the cup in his hand as he urged loudly for a third song. Gong Yu smiled, but before she could reply, one of the man-

servants of the Xie residence suddenly ran into the hall and fell onto the ground in a bow before Xie Yu, his expression panicked as he said, gasping for breath, “For...forgive me, Marquis...there are, are guests outside....”

Xie Yu frowned. “What guests? Didn’t I order you all to close the gates and turn away all guests for tonight?”

“Your servant couldn’t stop them, they have, have already entered....”

Xie Yu raised an eyebrow as a cold voice sounded from outside the hall. “We made an agreement long ago, so why is Brother Zhuo turning away his guest? Could it be that he is staying in the residence of the Marquis of Ning in order to hide from this challenge of mine?”

Chapter 89: A Warrior's Broken Wrist

Following this cold challenge, which was nonetheless delivered in a calm manner, several figures appeared outside the gates of Rain-Chime Hall. The first was dressed in light gray robes, his hair rolled up in a bun in the Chu fashion, his face narrow. His gaze was directed at the main seats in the hall, his entire person wound up like a sword that had been bent, fierce but foreign.

This was Yue Xiuze, the fifth-ranked of Langya's List of Martial Arts Experts, one of the heads of the palace of Da Chu, and renowned over the world for his skill in the Eyun method of swordsmanship.

Xie Yu rose, fury on his face, as he said in a thundering voice, "Mister Yue, you are trespassing in my private residence, how dare you act with such discourtesy? Is this the kind of etiquette that is taught in the courts of Da Chu?"

"Unjust, unjust." Almost before Xie Yu had finished, Yuwen Xuan appeared behind Yue Xiuze, smiling cheerfully as he continued, "Yue Xiuze retired from his court position half a month ago, and is now only a common jianghu man. Whatever dissatisfaction Marquis Xie bears towards his person is his own, but kindly refrain from lightly invoking the reputation of the courts of Da Chu."

Xie Yu's expression shifted, and he turned his ice cold gaze onto Yuwen Xuan. "Then His Highness Prince Ling at least can be considered part of the court of Da Chu, can he not? What excuse do you have for forcing your way in like this?"

"I did not force my way in." Yuwen Xuan widened his eyes in shock, his expression exaggeratedly wounded. "Let us make this clear, we are not affiliated with Yue Xiuze, I came here today because I heard that it was Young Master Xiao's birthday, and thought that, as we had met previously, it was only appropriate

that I bring a gift in person to show my regard. While I was here, I thought I might take the opportunity to greet Marquis Xie. But when we arrived, servants of your esteemed manor were busy trying to prevent Yue Xiuze from entering, but no one was stopping us, so how was I to know we were not supposed to enter? If the Marquis does not believe me, he has only to ask his own servants.”

His ridiculous words were nonetheless twisted into such skillful banter that he actually rendered Xie Yu speechless. In truth, the other person had only entered his manor, and had not actually done anything, and had even brought a gift for his son’s birthday. If he took action against this ambassador sent to forge a marriage alliance between their two countries, and had this prince of Da Chu roughly thrown out, it would be a great loss of composure on his part, and so he could only force down his anger and turn his attention to Yue Xiuze. “Our manor does not welcome guests like Brother Yue, but if he is willing to leave now, we will let the matter pass. Otherwise.....do not blame us for any discourteous actions.”

The entire hall was quiet, and he had not spoken softly, and so Yue Xiuze should have heard him very clearly, but from the latter’s expression, it was as if he had not heard his words at all. Yue Xiuze turned his clear gaze onto Zhuo Dingfeng and spoke in the same indifferent tone he had used previously. “This challenge is made according to the rules of jianghu, and for its sake I have even renounced my position in the court. If Brother Zhuo means to refuse, he ought to at least speak for himself. The Brother Zhuo I know does not hide under the wings of another, or could it be that, since Brother Zhuo has forged familial ties with Marquis Xie, he is no longer a man of jianghu?”

Zhuo Dingfeng’s face shifted, and he pressed one hand to the table as he stood, but Xie Yu put a hand on his shoulder.

Jianghu challenges were a common form of competition and interaction in the martial world, and were completely different

from fights related to revenge or emotion. It was well known that in the context of challenges, it was considered very bad form to do your opponent real harm and injury, as this was looked upon as poor sportsmanship and bad manners, particularly when it came to experts like Yue Xiuze and Zhuo Dingfeng, since they could easily determine the winner before either resorted to injuring the other. And so, aside from the fact that the setting was not the most appropriate, it was not very risky for Zhuo Dingfeng to accept this challenge. At worse, he would lose, and lose a little of his reputation and ranking, but as a man of jianghu, refusing an honest challenge like this would lose him far more respect.

And so, most of those present could not understand why Xie Yu was so insistent on stopping him. Was Yue Xiuze's manner of entering the manor really so discourteous?

The Marquis of Ning felt the wondering gazes of his guests on him, and found it a little difficult to speak. To tell the truth, everyone knew of Yue Xiuze's affinity for issuing challenges to martial arts experts, and as for his trespassing, the best way to handle the situation would be to smile and forgive him graciously, and so demonstrate the generosity and nobility fitting for a gentleman of his ranking. Unfortunately, he simply could not do that today.

This was because Xia Dong and Meng Zhi were present. And because Yue Xiuze was a martial arts master.

When Xia Dong had abruptly attacked Zhuo Dingfeng just now, her purpose had been to examine his fighting style in order to try to match his attack strokes with the injuries and marks on the bodies of the guards murdered on New Year's Eve. Xie Yu had predicted this, and so had warned Zhuo Dingfeng in advance. They had anticipated that Xia Dong was only exploring a possibility and would not dare to fight too aggressively, and so Zhuo Dingfeng had casually intercepted her attacks and changed the ends of each stroke slightly, just enough not to rouse the suspicions of the lady

officer of the Xuanjing Bureau.

But they could not employ the same tricks against Yue Xiuze. Firstly, he had fought against Zhuo Dingfeng in the past and knew his moves, and secondly, he had come to issue a challenge, and although he would not be fighting to injure, he would certainly not hold back either. It is said that in a competition between true masters, the difference between victory and defeat was measured in centimeters. And so it was not only risking a terrible loss for Zhuo Dingfeng to hide any part of his skill or fighting style in a contest like this, it was a question of whether it would be possible at all....

But if Zhuo Dingfeng used his full strength and ability in a competition against Yue Xiuze, then even if by some great fortune Xia Dong did not pick up on the patterns, there was still no chance that Meng Zhi, the greatest martial arts master in Da Liang, would be fooled as well. And, on the surface at least, the principle investigator of the case of the murdered guests was precisely this Commander of the Imperial Guard.

A thin sheen of sweat was breaking out over Xie Yu's forehead, and he was starting to regret not having both Zhuo father and son removed from the capital long before this. But then again, who could have guessed that a Yue Xiuze would appear from Da Chu out of nowhere, and challenge Zhuo Dingfeng to a fight on a night when both Xia Dong and Meng Zhi were present?

"Brother Yue, it is my youngest son's birthday tonight, can we not delay to another day?" Zhuo Dingfeng asked gently.

"No."

"And why not?"

"I have taken only half a year's leave from the court, and it is only during this time that I may travel freely in search of competition."

“Then how about tomorrow? You should not be in such a hurry as that, should you?”

“Tomorrow....” Yue Xiuze’s gaze clouded over with grief, though no one looking understood why. “The night is long and the dreams are many, who is to say what will happen on this night? Who can know whether tomorrow will ever come? Since we have met, why not settle it now? There is no crime in competition, and perhaps it will even liven up your son’s birthday banquet.”

“Brother Yue’s meaning is to settle it tonight, here and now?”

“Correct.”

“Impudence!” Xie Yu gritted his teeth, his tone furious. “Tonight is our son’s birthday banquet, and there are esteemed guests present! How dare you trespass and cause a ruckus! Guards! Take him away immediately!”

Yue Xiuze’s expression did not change as he said slowly, “Brother Zhuo, you know very well whether I have come to issue a challenge or to cause a ruckus. Give me a straight answer.”

A dozen guards had already rushed forward and were surrounding Yue Xiuze, their spears pointed at him in a circle, and seemed about to charge when Zhuo Dingfeng suddenly cried out, “Halt!”

Xie Yu’s eyebrows lifted and his hand tightened on Zhuo Dingfeng’s shoulder, but before he could speak, the Chief of Tianquan Manor turned his earnest gaze to him and said lowly, “Brother Xie, forgive me, I.....am a jianghu man after all.....but please do not worry, I will take care of this matter thoroughly....”

Xie Yu looked at him and seemed to understand what he was saying, and he was about to protest when he stopped, thought for a moment, and then hardened his resolve and slowly released his grip on Zhuo Dingfeng’s shoulder, his own voice warm as he said, “I have never doubted Brother Zhuo’s judgement.”

Zhuo Dingfeng smiled faintly and stood, his expression calm, as he turned to face Yue Xiuze and said, "Please."

By this time, Gong Yu had already taken the zither to a corner, and a large empty space opened up in the middle of the hall, a natural competition ground. Although they had not yet drawn their swords, the confidence and strength emanating from the two masters facing each other already far surpassed that of their young disciples who had fought two days ago.

To show their respect for this competition, everyone aside from the Grand Princess had stood up, and even Xie Qi, her hands folded over her swollen belly, was standing with the help of her husband.

Because Yuwen Xuan and his people were standing just outside the hall, its doors were kept open. A gentle breeze drifted in from the cool evening air, making the candles flutter and their shadows dance along the walls. In the space between the flicker of a flame, two swords were swept from their sheaths, clashing together like lightning.

Both Tianquan and Eyun were renowned for their swordsmanship, and both sects had been formed around a hundred years ago, and were evenly matched in their victories and losses against each other through the history of their competition. In the jianghu world, aside from Northern Yan Tuoba Hao's 'Seasword Method', which might be able to best them both, none of the other sects founded on swordsmanship was anywhere near their match. Zhou Dingfeng had fought and won his first match against Yue Xiuze at the age of twenty seven, and at thirty-five, he had fought him again and bested him once more. He should have had the advantage based on this record, but from the solemn expression on his face, one could see that no matter how many times he had won, this was still a competitor he could not take lightly.

And so it was that the two met for their third match in this hall, but after close to a hundred strokes, the match was still nowhere near its climax, and at first glance, the fight seemed even less

interesting than the one between Xiao Jingrui and Nie Nie.

In fact, the two competitions could hardly be compared, and this truth was understood by no one better than Xia Dong, who had been a witness at both.

Her gaze shone, and she seemed to be completely absorbed in the fight, forgetting to pay attention to anything else. Each stroke of the sword was the epitome of precision and elegance, its angle and strength and speed a wonder to behold. It was as if the spirit of the sword itself was driving every motion, making the same moves the younger fighters had demonstrated a few days ago seem amateurish and awkward by comparison.

Zhuo Qingyao and Xiao Jingrui appreciated this aspect even more, as the two stood in the most brightly-lit part of the hall, their gazes unwavering as they scrutinized each move. A meeting of two martial arts masters such as this could teach them more than a year's worth of formal training.

But, in contrast to the majority of the audience, there were three people in the hall who did not appear particularly interested in the ongoing fight. Grand Princess Liyang had her eyes closed and was leaning against the armrest of her couch, in direct contrast to the anxious expressions of Xie Yu and Mistress Zhuo beside her. Mei Changsu was looking in the right direction, but from his blank expression and dazed stare, it was evident that he was thinking about something else entirely. And in the corner, Gong Yu sat cradling the zither, examining its carved wooden patterns carefully, her long hair falling around her face as she never even lifted her head to the excitement before her.

All three were waiting for the match to end, Princess Liyang because she simply didn't care, but the other two, the other two were waiting because they knew the true climax was yet to come....

Meng Zhi's finger, which had been resting on the desk beside him, suddenly stiffened, and his hand tightened into a fist. Mei

Changsu, startled by the sudden movement, turned his attention back to the match. The two figures were still in motion, the balance of the fight seemingly unchanged, but the true experts in the audience had already noted the difference, and knew that the moment of victory was at hand.

By some strange coincidence, the final stroke of this duel was the same as the last stroke in the match between Xiao Jingrui and Nie Nie two days ago.

The Tianquan sword spun through the air, but when Yue Xiuze lifted his sword to block it, what rose up in its wake was not a net of light like the one his disciple had summoned, but a wall of light instead.

A sudden mist of water droplets arose, and his opponent's sword broke through the wall of light. Yue Xiuze turned and side-stepped the lunge, but the sword had already torn a long opening into his robes, though it had not drawn blood. He drew breath evenly, his movements calm as he swiftly twisted his hand upwards to block the following attack.

Despite this, he knew in his heart that though he had only suffered the slightest loss, it was nonetheless a defeat. In the moves that followed, he could only seek to restrict this loss as much as possible, in a fight that was already finished.

A small smile had appeared on Zhuo Dingfeng's face, but there was grief, as well as determination, in that smile.

His last stroke had been caught by Yue Xiuze's defense, and he had only to use the moment when Yue Xiuze was raising his sword again to leap aside, and the battle would be over.

Everyone following the fight could predict this result, and they all seemed to relax, anticipating the conclusion. Only Xie Yu continued to stare, his gaze fixed on the center of the hall.

Mei Changsu let out a long, light sigh. Before the sigh had ended,

Yue Xiuze raised his sword and its tip sank into Zhuo Dingfeng's wrist, which should have moved aside moments ago. Blood sprayed through the air as the Tianquan sword clattered to the ground.

“Dad!”

“My lord!”

The cries of his wife and children rang out in the hall. Xiao Jingrui and Zhuo Qingyao raced to his side and helped Zhuo Dingfeng to his feet, turning murderous glares onto Yue Xiuze as they did so. “This was only a competition, how could you....”

Yue Xiuze seemed no less shocked than the two of them, and he stared at Zhuo Dingfeng as he stammered, “Brother Zhuo, you, you....”

“It was not Brother Yue's fault....” Zhuo Dingfeng was working hard to steady his voice. “Just then, at the last moment, I lost my focus....”

Xiao Jingrui and Zhuo Qingyao were not amateurs, and they had spoken only out of anxiety. In truth, they understood that Yue Xiuze was not at fault, but while Xiao Jingrui felt confusion warring with the shock in his mind, a glimpse of understanding stirred in Zhuo Qingyao's heart.

“Quick, bring the doctor, quick!” Xie Yu hurried over and took Zhuo Dingfeng's wrist in his own hands. When he saw the severity of the injury to the tendons and understood that the chance of full recovery was slim, a complicated series of emotions passed over his face.

“This is only an external injury, there is no need to call the doctor. Have Qingyao bring the jinchuang medicine and bind up the wound, and that will be enough.” Zhuo Dingfeng avoided Xie Yu's gaze as he spoke quietly.

Xia Dong and Meng Zhi, who had been observing the chaos with

wondering expressions, now exchanged a glance.

Although what could be observed had already been seen, Zhou Dingfeng's injury scattered everything to the winds once more, and the only solid connection between Xie Yu and the murdered guards had now vanished for good.

Zhuo Dingfeng had been unwilling to turn down the challenge and betray jianghu etiquette, but he had also refused to allow himself to be caught and thus implicate Xie Yu as well, and so no matter whether he had been right to do what he had done, one could not help respecting his courage. It was a pity that Zhuo Qingyao's skill was still lacking, and so it would be many years before the name of Tianquan could appear on the Langya Lists again.

"I am the one who lost this match." Yue Xiuze looked at Zhuo Dingfeng's pale face and said firmly, "We of the Eyun Method will await the challenge of the heirs of Tianquan in the future." He cupped his fists and bowed.

"Thank you, Brother Yue." Zhuo Dingfeng's wrist was being wrapped, and so he could not salute, but he bowed back before turning to Xie Yu and saying, "I have indeed given Brother Yue my word in the past to answer his challenge at any time and in any place, so I beg you to forgive his intrusion into the manor tonight."

Xie Yu smiled. "What are you saying? Jianghu has its own rules, this I know well, and I will not hold this against Brother Yue, do not worry. Come, come away and rest now, alright?"

Although the injury to his body had not been severe, the wound to his heart had been significant, and Zhuo Dingfeng did want to retire to his own rooms for some rest, and so he nodded, and was turning to leave under the support of his two sons when suddenly a clear high voice said, "Please wait!"

Chapter 90: Past Endurance

The call came so abruptly that everyone was taken aback. The owner of the voice came forward clasping his hands in a bow of the Da Liang custom, smiling apologetically, “I am sorry for startling everyone....”

“Your Highness Prince Ling, what is it you want this time?” Xie Yu’s impatience was palpable, his temper nearly fraying.

Yuwen Xuan glanced at him, but did not reply, turning instead to Yue Xiuze and saying quietly, “Uncle Yue, I have kept my promise and allowed you to have your challenge, now it should be time for me to make my move, should it not?”

“Hey,” Zhuo Qingyao sounded furious. “My dad has just been injured, are you trying to take advantage of his weakness? If you want a fight, fight me!”

“Aiya, misunderstanding, misunderstanding,” Yuwen Xuan waved his hands. “I was not speaking of a martial competition, who among those present could I possibly defeat? I only meant, it would be better for Chief Zhuo to stay for the next part of the evening.”

Xie Yu scoffed coldly. “What nonsense, Brother Zhuo, don’t mind him, your health is most important.”

Mei Changsu said suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, “Jingrui, give your dad one of the heart-protection pills I gave you.”

“Ah?” Xiao Jingrui stared blankly. It was an external injury of the wrist, what good would heart-protection pills do?

Mei Changsu met Zhuo Dingfeng’s gaze and sighed, “The pain of losing of an art honed over a lifetime is felt in the heart, not in the hand. Chief Zhuo must be feeling this loss, and it must be having an ill effect on his health. The night is not over, Chief Zhuo must take care.”

The first sentence was barely out before Xiao Jingrui was rushing towards the table holding his gifts to retrieve the pills, and so he did not hear the second half, as he busied himself handing over medicine and water to his father.

Yuwen Xuan stood to one side, watching quietly until the the fuss was over before he pulled at someone standing beside him, steering her forward with a hand on her back and saying gently, “Nie Nie, didn’t you come just for him? Go, don’t worry, I’ll be here.”

From the beginning, Nie Nie had clung to Yuwen Xuan’s side silently, dressed in a Chu style long robe and wearing a lady’s muslin cap. Now, as she was pushed before Xiao Jingrui, the girl was still silent, but from the angle of her head, it was evident that this Miss Nie Nie was staring at Xiao Jingrui.

The atmosphere suddenly grew still and solemn, and even the fun-loving Yan Yujin felt his heart speed up for some reason, and didn’t dare say anything to try to lighten the mood.

Xiao Jingrui was exceedingly uncomfortable under her gaze, and he racked his brain but couldn’t think of any connection between himself and this Miss Nie Nie aside from the fight two days ago. He waited for a long time, but she did not speak, and so finally he cleared his throat and asked, “Miss.....Nie Nie, do you.....have something to say to me?”

Nie Nie did not reply, but she slowly lifted a hand and undid the ribbons under her chin that were tying her cap to her head. Her fingers trembled, and it took a long time.

Mei Changsu closed his eyes and turned his head away, as if he couldn’t bear to watch.

The cap was finally untied, and dropped lightly to the ground. The candlelight in the room illuminated the features of the young girl, and it felt suddenly as if the air was sucked out of the room, although no one made a sound.

One glance, only a single glance, and Xiao Jingrui felt as if his heart had been struck by a thick peg, stopping all blood flow. His face was pale as parchment, and he stood as if frozen in place.

The two stood like this, staring at one another. To everyone looking on, it was as if two copies had been made of the same face, one sharper and more heroic, given to the boy, and one sweeter and gentler, given to the girl.

But the brows, the eyes, the arch of the nose, they were all identical.....of course, there were many people in this world without familial relations who had similar features, but Yuwen Xuan's next words broke the silence and shattered any remaining doubts.

"This is your sister, the Refined Princess Yuwen Nie, the daughter of my uncle Prince Sheng Yuwen Lin...."

There was a muffled crash from the direction of the main seats, and when everyone turned to look, Grand Princess Liyang had fainted, her eyes shut and her complexion waxen, her serving girl crying as she held onto her.

Yuwen Xuan's voice continued cruelly, as if there had been no interruption. "Twenty years ago, when my uncle was held hostage in your esteemed country, he was under the care of the Grand Princess, and so my sister is here today to pay thanks to the Grand Princess on behalf of her father. Nie Nie, go and bow to the Grand Princess."

Yuwen Nie's eyes were brimming with tears as she stepped forward slowly, knelt down before the Grand Princess and touched her head to the ground three times. When she was finished, she stood and turned back towards Xiao Jingrui, her gaze filled with hope and expectation.

But at this moment, Xiao Jingrui's vision was only a blur. He could not see her, and could not see his family of more than twenty years standing in the hall. He could not see anything, and it was as

if he floated alone in a dark void, feeling nothing except soul-wrenching pain and a crippling sense of loss.

When he was young, he had once wanted very much to know whether he was the child of the Zhuo family or the child of the Xie family. But later, as he grew older, he had gradually begun to accept that he was both a child of the Zhuo family and a child of the Xie family. His two sets of parents and his brothers and sisters were the most important family to him, and he loved them, and was loved by them, and so not even in his worst nightmares could he have imagined that one day, the heavens would coldly inform him that everything he had called his own for the past twenty years would turn out to be nothing but dust and ashes....

Grand Princess Liyang woke slowly, her brow soaked in cold sweat, her hair falling down around her face, her cheeks pale as snow, looking as if she had suddenly aged ten years. Her serving girl lifted a cup of hot tea to her lips but she pushed it aside and sat up, visibly shaking, and stretched out a hand as she cried out in a hoarse voice, “Rui’er, Rui’er, come here to Mother, come here....”

Xiao Jingrui turned towards her slowly, his eyes dazed as he took in her wan complexion, but it was as if his feet had been nailed to the ground.

“Rui’er! Rui’er!” Grand Princess Liyang’s voice was desperate, and she fought to stand, but her knees would not support her, and so she could only crawl in starts and fits, supported by her serving girl and her momo, towards the dais, murmuring as she went, “Don’t be afraid, there is still Mother, Mother is here....”

The first to recover was Zhuo Dingfeng. Over the past twenty years, he had been prepared for the possibility that Jingrui was not his flesh-and-blood son, and the part of the revelation that was most shocking and difficult to accept lay with Xiao Jingrui and Xie Yu, and so, in contrast, he was actually able to gain control over his emotions more quickly than the others.

And so, it was he who was the first to take Xiao Jingrui by the shoulder and gently steer him towards Grand Princess Liyang.

Mei Changsu glanced at Gong Yu out of the corner of his eye. This glance was a message, and an order. Of course, in the stunned silence of the hall, no one noticed this glance of ice-cold determination and iron-hard resolve.

Except Gong Yu.

Gong Yu carefully set down the zither in her arms, took a few steps forward into the candlelight and lifted her head, suddenly letting out a laugh as clear as bells.

The sound of her laughter was like someone drawing a knife across a tightly-pulled bowstring. Everyone jumped, turning their astonished gazes onto her.

“Miss Gong Yu, you....” Yan Yujin stared at her, shocked into stillness.

This was because the Gong Yu before him was no longer the sweet, gentle lady he had come to know. Although her slim figure and snowy complexion were the same, the fierceness and fury radiating off her were entirely unfamiliar, a sort of murderous rage that might be harboured by a demon of revenge, and which made one tremble to look upon her.

“Marquis Xie,” Gong Yu’s icy gaze pierced straight through the master of this residence. Her every word was crisp when she spoke again. “I now finally understand why you had to kill my father. It was because my late father was remiss in his assignment, he had received orders to kill the illegitimate child of your own wife, but killed instead the child of the Zhuo family, and so failed to complete the mission you gave to him....”

Her words fell like a ton of explosives, rippling through everyone in the hall. Xie Yu’s face turned red and then white, and with a furious shout, he grabbed the Tianquan sword which had been

dropped to the ground and charged straight at Gong Yu.

Xie Yu was a martial arts master as well, and he came charging towards her like clap of thunder, but the delicate Gong Yu only twisted slightly, like an ethereal spirit hovering in the air, and neatly dodged the attack.

Xia Dong's voice was hoarse as she asked, "The killer who came that night, the night of the storm.....who was he to you?"

"That was my late father." Before Gong Yu had even finished replying, Xie Yu was shouting in a fury, "Guards!"

Following this command, a figure came spinning out of the darkness towards Gong Yu. He sent three daggers flying at her as he drew out a thin bone-handled blade, its edge gleaming with the shine of poison, and barreled towards her.

Gong Yu took the attack in stride, deflecting the daggers, and was preparing to intercept the poisoned blade when an arm out flew in front of her, sending the blade flying, and its owner dropped stoically in front of her, guarding her against further attacks. It was Mistress Zhuo.

"Go on, keep talking, who killed my child?" Mistress Zhuo's eyes were almost glowing red, and her voice was fierce, with none of her usual gentle elegance.

"Wife, please calm down," Zhuo Dingfeng said soothingly as he turned to face Xie Yu. "Brother Xie, please allow Miss Gong to finish, if she is speaking nonsense, I will be the first to condemn her!"

"If you want to know whether I am speaking nonsense or not, you have only to look at Master Xiao's face." Gong Yu's words seemed to pierce right to the heart. "Can anyone here deny that Marquis Xie had the motivation to kill that infant? At the time, the infant died without a wound or scar on his body, only a little redness between his eyebrows, am I correct? Marquis Xie was

young at the time, and was not as thorough as he is now, so the leader of that assassin group still lives, and if Chief Zhuo were to meet him, I fear he would be able to learn yet more details of the event. Or perhaps.....we can ask Her Highness the Grand Princess. Your Highness knew from the beginning that your husband was planning to murder your son, but you could not confront him directly, and the turmoil you faced must have been great indeed. But fortunately, although the sisters you confided in were no longer around, you at least had your devoted momo by your side....”

Grand Princess Liyang felt as if her heart had been pierced by a sword, and she moaned as she covered her face, finally collapsing under the weight of this onslaught, this terrible storm that had arisen so abruptly. Her momo was standing beside her, her face wet with tears.

“What a stream of nonsense!” Xie Yu’s brows were trembling with rage as he lifted a hand and shouted, “Guards! Take this woman and kill her on the spot!”

At his command, the guards of the Xie manor immediately surged forward towards Gong Yu. Zhou Dingfeng stood in a dazed stupor, and it was Mistress Zhuo who gritted her teeth and cried out, “Yao’er! Yi’er!”

Zhuo Qingyi bolted straight for her mother, but Zhuo Qingyao hesitated, and carefully carried his stunned wife to a pillar in a corner of the hall before flying back to his parents’ side. Yan Yujin looked at Gong Yu, and then took Xiao Jingrui by the arm and dragged his unmoving friend to Mei Changsu’s side before taking up his own position in front of Gong Yu.

Xie Yu’s face was thunderous, his gaze murderous as he looked down at the crowd.

From his perspective, there was no choice but to kill Gong Yu, and an irrevocable split between the Zhuo and Xie families seemed

unavoidable as well. Even if Zhuo Dingfeng didn't immediately turn against him, the hostility borne of a murdered child was no small matter. Even with the bond of marriage between their children, Xie Yu was not confident he could hold the loyalty of Zhuo Dingfeng. And Zhou Dingfeng had worked for him in his position as a master of jianghu for too many years, taking care of court business in ways that he could not, and so he simply knew too much. If he let him go now, he might as well send him tied and wrapped in ribbon to Prince Yu's doorstep. Xie Yu knew he could not control his allegiance any longer, and so this was not a risk he could afford to take. Besides, after tonight, Prince Yu would certainly do his best to take him into his protection, and it would be difficult to dispose of him in the future if the need arose. On the other hand, if he took care of things in his own manor tonight, and burned these bridges as ruthlessly as he could, clearing away the muddied water for fresh, untainted springs, then there might yet be hope.

As he made his decision, his heart was a piece of solid, unyielding iron.

"Flying Eagle Squadron, surround them! Call in the archers!"

As soon as she heard the word 'archers', Xie Qi cried out loudly, "Father!" and was about to rush for him, but Xie Yu waved a hand and guards came forward to restrain her. By this time, Xie Bi was almost out of his mind with shock, and his mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

"Brother Xie," Zhuo Dingfeng's voice trembled, its coldness seeming to drive into the very bone. "What are you doing?"

"This woman is lying and delusional, and must die here according to law. If you protect her, I will not be responsible for any harm that comes to you!"

Zhuo Dingfeng had only intended to let Gong Yu finish, and to make a decision after he had investigated what had really

happened all those years ago, and had not been intending to protect her at all. But when he heard Xie Yu's response, he realized the malicious intent behind his words, and he was so angry he began shaking in fury. Xia Dong, who had been observing from the side, finally had to speak up. "Marquis Xie, did you forget about me and Commander Meng? Outright murder such as this is a little on the lawless side, wouldn't you say?"

Xie Yu gritted his teeth. He knew it was foolish to kill Zhuo Dingfeng in front of Xia Dong and Meng Zhi, but if he didn't kill him now, he knew Zhuo Dingfeng would be taken into Prince Yu's protection as soon as he left the doors of this manor, and there would be no second chance. The arrow had been strung, and it must be fired. There was no good solution, but a decision still had to be made.

"Our nation has a law, those who meddle in witchcraft must die immediately. This woman has bewitched an audience within my manor and deluded and deceived them. Officer Xia, pray do not get involved." Xie Yu turned away coldly and gestured for his men to fan out, blocking the exit from the hall.

But he knew very well in his heart that none of those present would be easy to deal with, especially Xia Dong and Meng Zhi, who posed a particular difficulty. Firstly, it might not be possible to kill off these two, and secondly, even if he did manage to kill them, it would not be easy explaining the deaths of these two persons in his own manor, and so Xie Yu was fully prepared for the possibility of these two escaping. There was no better plan to be had in the moment, and the best option was to shut as many mouths as he could now, and then when it came to his word against Xia Dong's and Meng Zhi's before the Emperor, then it was only a matter of seeing whom the Emperor would believe. And if that person came back as well, and spoke on his behalf, perhaps there could still be a way out.

"Marquis Xie, if you have something to say, let us use our words,

why must we resort to bloodshed?" Meng Zhi saw that Xie Yu truly harboured murderous intentions, and couldn't help raising an eyebrow. "Neither I nor Officer Xia could possibly stand by and let today's events pass unnoticed, so please, I beg you to reconsider."

Xie Yu laughed coldly. "This is my manor, what are you waiting for? If you mean to report this to His Majesty, feel free. But as for that woman and those she has bewitched, I fear you will not be able to save them."

Meng Zhi's brow furrowed, and he knew these were no empty words. A first-ranked military official's manor contained 800 troops, and of those, 500 were armed, and so would be difficult to handle. Not to mention, once the archers arrived and began firing down at them from all sides, it didn't matter how good his own martial ability was, he would still be hard-pressed to protect himself, much less guard the Zhuo family and the others as well. He turned and looked at Mei Changsu.

But Mei Changsu was looking at Grand Princess Liyang.

Grand Princess Liyang was clearly dazed, but she was walking determinedly towards Xiao Jingrui, obviously wanting nothing more than to be by his side.

"Liyang," Xie Yu turned to her as well, his voice gentle. "Don't pay any attention, I will not hurt Jingrui, if I wanted to kill him, I would already have done so long ago, so do not worry. Everything I do is for you, you must not forget that...."

Grand Princess Liyang looked at her husband of more than twenty years and felt a shattering pain in her heart. She fell to the ground, sobbing silently.

Xie Yu's gaze turned to Yuwen Xuan, who shrugged and said, "If you do not hurt those Nie Nie cares about, then I will not wade into these muddy waters. After all, in the end, what does it have to do with me?"

Xie Yu laughed coldly. "Alright, I will certainly accept this favour from His Highness Prince Ling." His gaze swept over the hall once more, and halted over Mei Changsu, as if he was making up his mind to take care of this troublesome enemy strategist while he had the chance.

Meng Zhi, worried, took up a position in front of Mei Changsu and turned his head to ask, "Where's Fei Liu?"

Mei Changsu's eyes gleamed and he laughed out loud. "Finally, someone remembers Fei Liu. Actually, I have been waiting for Marquis Xie to ask this all along, but unfortunately, you seem to have forgotten that I brought along a little friend."

Xie Yu's heart sank just as a soldier came running over to report, "Marquis, it's not good, all the archers' bowstrings have been cut...."

"Useless!" Xie Yu kicked him over. "What about the backup bows?"

"Also.....also....."

There was practically steam rising from Xie Yu's head, but Mei Changsu's voice was gentle as he called, "Fei Liu, you're back, was it fun?"

"Fun!" The youth who had entered Rain-Shower Hall somehow at some point in time completely unnoticed now appeared beside his Su gege, his eyes wide as he took in the swords all around him.

Xie Yu had gotten his fury under control, and now he lifted his face to the sky as he laughed. "Su Zhe, you think I cannot deal with you all just because I have been deprived of my archers? I fear the qilin prodigy has underestimated the power of the Marquis of Ning."

"Perhaps," Mei Changsu said quietly. "The Marquis is determined to spill blood this night, so how can I stop him? But everything that bears fruit was once planted, and tonight, the

Marquis is only reaping what he sowed. And no matter how you resist, this fruit you must eat in the end.”

Xie Yu put his hands behind his back, his voice proud. “Don’t make empty threats. I do not believe in divine decree, and I have weathered greater storms than this. Do you think the events of this night can topple me?”

“I know they can.” Mei Changsu inclined his head. “The Marquis does not believe in divine law, and does not know the meaning of righteousness or benevolence, and so naturally, there is nothing you would not dare. But I am not like the Marquis, I have always been a coward, fearful and wary, and so before I dared to enter the Marquis’ door tonight, I made some preparations. His Highness Prince Yu is standing outside your gate at this very moment with his army, and if I do not come out, then I fear he will not hesitate to force his way in for a rescue....”

Xie Yu peered at him in disbelief. “Did you really think I would believe that? For you, a mere strategist, Prince Yu would dare to break into the residence of a first-ranked Marquis?”

Mei Changsu’s smile was cheerful and his tone light as he replied, “Certainly he would not take the risk just for me. But for an opportunity to ruin you, then, Marquis, what do you think?”

Chapter 91: Fighting Side by Side

Mei Changsu had spoken with casual carelessness, but a muscle in Xie Yu's cheek jumped, and he beckoned one of his servants over and spoke to him in a low voice for a moment before the man ran off to carry out his orders, most likely to go and see whether there really was an army at their gates.

Mei Changsu smiled and said, "Looks like it won't come to blows for now. As we are standing around in any case, Miss Gong Yu, perhaps you may finish what you had to say? Perhaps Chief Zhuo will realize it was simply a misunderstanding after all, and that we have made a mountain out of a molehill, and that could only be a good thing, no?"

"Alright." Despite the tense atmosphere, Gong Yu still looked calm, her every word crisp and clear as she spoke. "As you have already heard, my late father was an assassin, and because his skill was formidable, he quickly became known for his craft. But though his reputation spread far and wide, the only person in the world who knew his true identity was the leader of the group of assassins to which he belonged. It is said that killers must be heartless, because those whom they love would only become a hindrance to them. And so it was that after my father met my late mother, he decided to wash his hands of this profession. At the time, Mother had just discovered that she was with child, and the leader of the assassins group asked my father to complete one last mission before retiring. This last mission was a request from a very important person in the court to kill a yet unborn infant."

She was speaking slowly, her tone even, but the words made those listening shiver with dread. Xiao Jingrui was shaken out of his stupor by the sudden realization that he was the infant who was supposed to have been killed, and the pain in his heart doubled.

"The instructions of the mission were given in great detail, from

the identity of the pregnant woman, to her appearance and whereabouts, to the appearance of the momo always by her side – all of this was detailed thoroughly. Father followed the Grand Princess for a month, and finally, she went into labour. Who could have thought that such a great storm would rise up that night and cause such chaos? The woman and the child were both surrounded by so many people that Father could find no opening to act, and so he could only return to the forest in the hills to hide for one more day. He returned the second night, and as he had already learned to recognize the Grand Princess' momo, he quickly and silently killed the infant in her arms....”

Mistress Zhuo let out a wail, swaying as her daughter clutched her tightly, holding her upright.

“My father thought he had completed the mission and so he left Rui mountain, not knowing that the families had confused the infants on the night of the storm after his departure from the scene. When Xie Yu returned and learned that the surviving child had an even chance of being the infant that he had wanted to kill, he was furious and said it was better to risk killing the wrong child than letting him live, and forced my father to go back to finish the job. By this time, my mother had been with child for some time, and as my father started to feel the movements of his own child in her womb, he could not find it in his heart to murder another infant, and so he took my mother and fled. The leader of the assassins caught us, but he had known my father since their youth and couldn't bear to kill him, so he let us go. Who could have thought that the assassin would let us go, but Xie Yu would not? He sent other assassins after us, and we had been on the run for two years when, finally, my father settled my mother and me in a brothel in a small town, and ran off alone to lead away the assassins on our tail. He never returned. After I grew older, I investigated in depth and learned that he had been killed by Xie Yu's men seven months after he left us.”

“But if Father-in-Law.....ah.....Marquis Xie was unwilling to let even you go, how could he have spared Jingrui, and let him live until now?” Zhuo Qingyao, who had managed to remain relatively calm, immediately asked.

“For the answer to this question, we must ask the Grand Princess.” Gong Yu turned slowly to the woman they were all pitying. “No one knew why that infant died, but you knew. That’s why, for the first few years, you protected the remaining child almost frantically, refusing to leave his side day or night, isn’t that right?”

Mistress Zhuo felt her heart lurch as she remembered the early years of Jingrui’s life. When he lived in the capital, Princess Liyang never left his side, and when he stayed at the Tianquan manor, Princess Liyang still followed him closely. At the time, she had thought this was because it was her first child, and she had received a fright previously, and had not thought much more about any other reason for her protectiveness.

“As Master Xiao grew older, Xie Yu’s determination to kill him grew weaker, because he too knew that the Grand Princess was aware of some things, and he did not want this to come between them. Most importantly, he had discovered that he could use Master Xiao as a tie to forge a close relationship with the formidable Tianquan Manor, and use the power of the Zhuo family to accomplish his goals.” Gong Yu looked at Zhuo Dingfeng. “Chief Zhuo knows this quite well, do you not? With a son in common, and increasingly frequent interactions, you began to develop a friendship, and even familial ties, and gradually, you started to trust this person unconditionally, and were willing to act in the dark for him, believing that what you were doing was right and for the good of the country, and that soon, your actions would bring glory to Tianquan Manor and the Zhuo clan....”

Zhuo Dingfeng’s lips were purple and he retched, vomiting fresh blood. The Zhuo family immediately clamoured in panic, but Mei

Changsu said quietly, "He has taken the heart-protection pill, no harm will come to him."

Yan Yujin heard this and jumped as if he had been reminded of something. He ran over to the table, picked up the bottle, and shook out a pill for Xiao Jingrui, shoving it into his mouth when there was no sign of any response from the latter and pouring a cup of tea down his throat afterwards for good measure.

Mei Changsu watched them, his gaze gentle, and let out a deep sigh.

"Brother Yue," Meng Zhi looked at the Da Chu master with deep feeling. "If you had been willing to meet Chief Zhuo another day, he would not have had to injure his wrist for Xie Yu's sake, and sacrifice all these years of work."

Yue Xiuze's face was stiff as he answered coldly, "My time was short. I only knew that he would discover on this night that this son was not his own, and worried that this would affect his mental performance when he came to fight against me, so I had to seize the chance and challenge him first. Who could have known he would be so foolish as to allow himself to sustain an injury, and how complicated the whole situation would turn out to be?"

"I do not blame Brother Yue, it was my own fault, I had eyes but could not see, and I was mistaken in my judgement." Zhuo Dingfeng's eyes were shining as he looked at Xie Yu, his forehead beaded in sweat. "When I think back on all the passionate words you said to me, it is enough to make me nauseous."

"Not everything I said was a lie." Xie Yu had actually managed to keep his calm. "Supporting the Crown Prince is a cause of great righteousness, all those others with wild ambitions are only traitors and usurpers. I once promised you glory for the Zhuo clan, and at least, up until now, I have never thought of going back on my word."

"But as soon as he expressed the slightest doubt or

dissatisfaction, you did not hesitate to wipe out his entire family?" Xia Dong laughed coldly. "In the end, how are you any different from those with wild ambitions?"

"The end justifies the means." A corner of Xie Yu's mouth curled in a smile. "His Majesty will understand my loyalty to the court."

Mei Changsu suddenly interrupted. "Marquis Xie, has the man you sent to look outside the manor returned yet?"

Xie Yu gazed at him steadily for a moment, and then suddenly laughed. "So it is indeed Mister Su who is the first to react. I have naturally had my own reasons for allowing you all to tarry and delay for so long."

Mei Changsu thought for a moment, and then raised an eyebrow. "You have summoned the Capitol Patrol?"

"Correct." Xie Yu's face was like ice. "What fighting power could Prince Yu's household troops have? The Capitol Patrol is certainly capable of preventing them from entering."

Meng Zhi said in a thunderous voice, "Xie Yu, the Capitol Patrol is not your household army, it is a great crime to seize them for your private use, are you truly so daring?"

"The Commander General should not make false accusations, how could I dare to summon the Capitol Patrol into my manor as my personal troops? But whether Prince Yu shows up or not, I am still able to have them stand guard on the street outside the manor to help keep the peace, am I not?"

Mei Changsu had never expected this night to pass peacefully, and with Xie Yu's summoning of the Capitol Patrol, the situation would only escalate, which might not entirely be a bad thing. But the most important task at hand was to protect the Zhuo family, young and old, and ensure they were not wiped out, and so he turned and glanced significantly at Meng Zhi, telling him to be ready.

Xie Yu's face was cold as frost, and he raised a hand, clearly about to give the order when someone ran forward and collapsed in front of him in a kneel, wrapping his arms around Xie Yu's legs. He lowered his head to look. It was Xie Bi.

"Father, I beg of you, reconsider!" Xie Bi's face was wan, his eyes shining with tears, as he pleaded, "The Zhuos and the Xies have been close for many years, as close as true family and perhaps closer, so whatever the misunderstanding, Father must not give the order to kill!"

"Useless!" Xie Yu shoved him aside with a foot. "How could I have raised someone as soft-hearted as a woman?"

"Father!" Xie Bi ignored the pain and crawled back to clutch his father's hand. "Who has not heard of the close ties between our two families? Is Father not afraid of the rumours and gossip that will be spread?"

"What do they know? You remember, and remember well, only those who survive have the right to speak. This is a matter of sacrificing family for the sake of righteousness, so get out of my way!"

Xie Bi's last hope died, and the hand clutching Xie Yu's sleeve shook. Suddenly, he lunged forward and grabbed the dagger hanging at his father's waist and laid it against his own neck, tears streaming down his face as he said, "Father, pray forgive your son for being unable to witness the choice you have made. If you must kill them, then kill your son first!"

Xie Yu looked at him coldly and scoffed. "You want to take your own life? Alright, do it."

"Father....."

"I have raised you all your life, do you think I do not know what kind of a person you are? If you truly have the guts to cut into your own neck, then I as your father have underestimated you." As he

spoke, Xie Yu strode forward and sent the dagger in Xie Bi's hand flying with one swift blow, then slapped his face with the backhand and gripped him by the neck, wrenching him to one side as he shouted, "Take the heir away and keep him under guard! The situation is chaotic, assist the Grand Princess and the young mistress back to the inner courtyard as well."

"Yes!"

"The woman in the hall is in league with the Zhuo clan, kill them on the spot according to the law!" Xie Yu turned and retreated to one side as the soldiers surged forward in his wake like a wave, full of bloodlust and murderous intent.

Xie Yu was a military man, and so his household troops were well-trained, particularly in the use of the long spear, and they seldom fought in close hand-to-hand combat, preferring to attack in formation. Although Meng Zhi and Xia Dong were masters, they could not use killing blows against these soldiers who were only following orders, and so the speed and strength of their attacks were somewhat limited. Besides, Meng Zhi was worried that Fei Liu would not be able to protect Mei Changsu on his own in the midst of such chaos, and so was often distracted. Two hours into the fight, the Zhuo family was in danger on all sides.

Zhuo Qingyao did not have a sword on his person, and only had a soft Emei sword Mistress Zhuo had handed to him, and he had to protect his newly-injured father besides, so it was not long before his arms were covered with blood. Zhuo Dingfeng's Tianquan sword had been seized by Xie Yu, Zhuo Qingyi only had the short dagger she carried for protection, and so Mistress Zhuo, wielding the other Emei soft sword, was standing guard in front of her husband and daughter, fending off attacks left and right, and it was clear she could not continue for much longer. She had just fended off several spears when there was a flash on her left, and when she retreated to defend herself, this left an opening to her front. The gleaming tip of a spear descended towards her, and by

the time she saw it, it was too late to dodge. Zhuo Qingyi screamed in terror, “Mum!”

The spear was about to pierce her stomach when a shining sword swept over like lightning, slicing off the tip of the spear. A long, slender figure dropped down in front of Mistress Zhuo, and the ten or more soldiers facing him retreated, several carrying wounds.

“Rui’er.....” Mistress Zhuo’s voice trembled, her eyes filling.

Xiao Jingrui said something to her quietly without turning his head, and from the back, it was impossible to see his expression. His low voice was shaking so much it was difficult to make out what he was saying.

But Mistress Zhuo answered tenderly, “Mum is alright.....don’t worry....”

When she saw Xiao Jingrui seize hold of the ceremonial sword hanging on the wall and leap into the fray, Yuwen Nian, who had been watching from the sidelines, stood as well and began cutting a path through the soldiers towards him. Yue Xiuze gazed doubtfully down on the scene for a moment and then let out a long sigh, and the Eyun sword was swept from its sheath once more as he began making his way to Zhuo Dingfeng’s side.

Xie Yu’s voice was furious as he shouted from the back, “Yuwen Xuan, didn’t you say you would not interfere?”

“I haven’t,” Yuwen Xuan spread his hands. “I said this has nothing to do with me, and so I have not moved so much as a step, so don’t wrong me like this, alright?”

Xie Yu had no time to deal with him, so he only scoffed and gestured for his subordinates to increase their attack. His two hundred spears were good fighters, and although the other side had just gained some strength, they had not yet managed to turn the tide, and all was yet quiet outside the manor, so it seemed that there would be no reinforcements.

“Officer Xia, I have heard that there is a kind of firework that is used for communication between Xuanjing officers, is that right?” At such a critical moment, Mei Changsu was actually striking up casual conversation with Xia Dong.

“Yes.” Xia Dong immediately understood his meaning and drew out a stick of firework from her pockets. She was about to turn to fight her way out to an opening when Mei Changsu stopped her.

“Let Fei Liu go, he likes these.”

Fei Lou did indeed like this, and he was much quicker at making his way out of the fight. The soldiers couldn’t even touch a corner of his robes, much less get their hands on him.

The firework soared into the sky and lit it up in a blaze of colour. Fei Liu lifted his head to watch, absently breaking the necks of two soldiers who had come chasing after him. Mei Changsu nodded at him approvingly, then turned to Meng Zhi. “Commander General, it seems that Prince Yu’s household troops cannot make their way in for now, and it will be some time before Officer Xia Chun arrives. I’m afraid I must impose on you. To catch a thief, one has only to catch their king. Let us take a hostage so that everyone might have a rest, look, some are wounded already, and not lightly.”

Meng Zhi understood immediately, and with a loud shout that stunned the soldiers all around him, he flew over their heads like a great gray bird out of Rain-Shower Hall, straight towards Xie Yu.

Xie Yu saw him coming and shuddered, knowing that Meng Zhi meant to hold him hostage to force the Xie manor’s troops to stop fighting. He shouted hurriedly for his guards to surround him and retreated quickly. Meng Zhi’s fighting prowess was almost second to none, and Xie Yu’s guards could only hold him for a moment, but in that moment, the Marquis of Ning had managed to disappear.

At the sight of Meng Zhi’s efforts ending in failure, and his wife

and children exhausted and injured all around him, the pain in Zhuo Dingfeng's heart swelled. At the beginning, he had only wanted to hear Gong Yu tell the truth of the story, and had never thought that Xie Yu would turn on them so ruthlessly. Now, faced with a seemingly endless wave of soldiers, and with their own side growing weaker and weaker, he feared they would only last another hour at most before they were defeated. The thought that his clan would be wiped out because of his own misplaced faith made him bow his head with unbearable shame, and he gave up resisting, closing his eyes and turning to face the descending spears.

Xiao Jingrui threw himself at his father and shoved Zhuo Dingfeng out of the way, raising his sword to catch the spears and averting the danger, although he gained another wound on his ribs for his troubles. Yue Xiuze, his eyes bulging with fury, shouted, "You defeat me only to die at the hands of these bastards? How can I ever lift my head again?"

Zhuo Dingfeng was shaken awake by these words, and he turned and picked up a spear in each hand, shouting back, "You're right, if I die, I will die with honour, and take a few of them with me!"